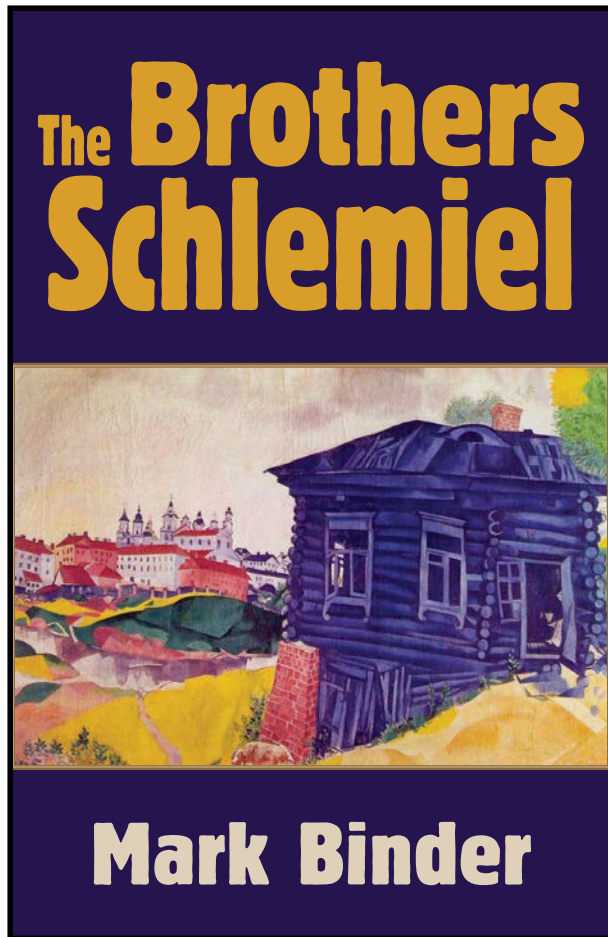


The first book serialized on the Internet returns as ebook...and print book!

"Wired Words/Electric Prose" —Providence Phoenix • "Dickens for the 21st Century

Life in Chelm with the Schlemiel Brothers... It's a misadventure.



"The Brothers Schlemiel is a book to savor. It is a timeless book that resonates in today's fast-paced digital society."

Mark Binder is the author who knows how to tell the right story for any age and any group. As a performer, he shares his stories with audiences of all ages across the USA. His collection, **A Hanukkah Present** was the finalist for the National Jewish Book Award for Family Literature.

Mark's first illustrated book, **Cinderella Spinderella** will be released this fall. Other books include, **The Bed Time Story Book**, **Matzah Mishugas**, **Stories for Peace**, and **It Ate My Sister**. Mark is also an award-winning recording artist, with six spoken-word albums available. For more information about him, please visit <http://markbinder.com/>

From the day they are born, Abraham and Adam Schlemiel create humor and cause trouble. No one, not even their parents, can tell them apart, which is sometimes and advantage, when they want to get out of chores. But when Adam falls in love with a girl who thinks he's Abraham, it's a huge problem.

Set in Chelm, the village of fools, **The Brothers Schlemiel** is both a tightly interwoven story of two lives, and a rambling picaresque novel filled with rich characters.

Originally written and serialized both in print and via email over the Internet, it is a page turner that can be enjoyed a bit at a time, but will call you to keep going and just read a little more.

Today, **The Brothers Schlemiel** has been reissued in its complete and unabridged form.

"A delicious and exciting novel of mixed identities told in bite-sized chapters. You won't want to put it down, but if you do, you will come back to it again and again... At last, one of the very first ebooks is restored to its full glory."

The Brothers Schlemiel

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Fiction: Coming of Age

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The Brothers Schlemiel: Questions and answers with Mark Binder

Q: What is Chelm, and how did you happen to write a novel set there?

BINDER: Chelm is a fictional village of fools in Eastern Europe. It has been used as a setting by many writers. Many of the stories told about Chelm are little more than jokes -- how the villagers tried to catch the moon in a rain barrel, or didn't want to walk on the lovely snow so they hired people to carry them.

I was on deadline, working as the editor of The Rhode Island Jewish Herald, and on we had a hole in the newspaper, so I wrote my first story of Chelm. When I left the paper, I found that newspapers and magazines around the world—some Jewish, but many non-Jewish—enjoyed those stories. I talked with Vicki Samuels at the Houston Jewish Herald Voice about the possibility of writing a novel. I don't think she ever expected it to run for 100 installments.

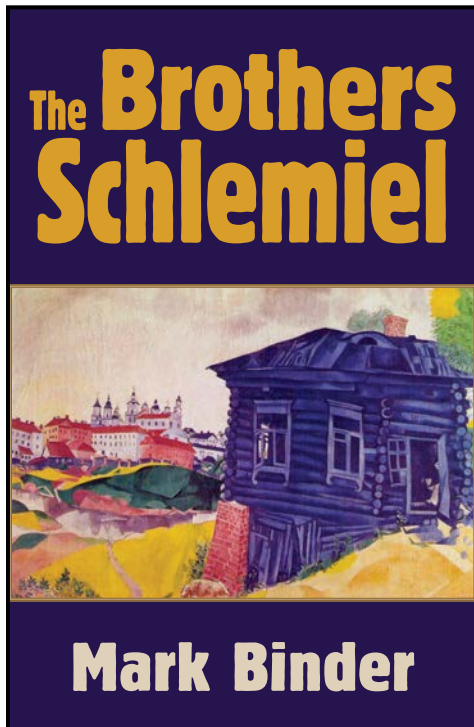


Q: The Brothers Schlemiel was the first novel to be serialized over the Internet. How did that happen?

BINDER: The novel was initially serialized once a week in the Houston Jewish Herald Voice

To contact Mark Binder for additional information -- and to schedule an interview, please email beth@storyamonth.com or call (401) 272-8707

Continued on next page



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beginning in 2009. Shortly after we began, I realized that with the Internet, it could be read by anyone in the world. We began selling subscriptions to the weekly email, which was quite a challenge especially in 2009. People had a hard time grasping that they might pay for something that came via email. No one had thought of it. Stephen King's failed attempt at serialization was to happen a few months later. To counter that, we recorded an excerpt called *The Brothers Schlemiel* from Birth to Bar Mitzvah. It was made up of eight of the first 30 installments, and does a pretty good job of telling part of the twins' early life. The first 100 copies of that CD were hand-burned and numbered. If you bought a CD, you got a free subscription to the email. For years afterwards, I had people telling me that they'd saved all their emails to a folder.

Q: What is the story of *The Brothers Schlemiel*?

BINDER: If only it were that simple! Abraham and Adam are identical twins, but because they are from Chelm, they are confused from the day they are born. The novel tells the story of their lives together—from the day they are born until the day that they finally separate. They grow up, get into and out of trouble and eventually fall in love, marry and have children. The book also tells stories of their parents, friends and neighbors.

Q: Did writing it as a serial make much of a difference?

BINDER: Absolutely! Every Monday morning I would take my laptop and go to a local coffee shop and write the first draft of an installment. On Tuesdays I would read it aloud to someone—a friend usually and scribble all over the printout. Then I'd edit and revise. I was about seven weeks ahead of publication, so if I made a mistake I could correct it.

Some of the installments were stand-alone stories. The initial serial was timed to the seasons, so Hanukkah stories happened during Hanukkah and Passover stories happened during Passover. Many of these were published in other newspapers.

Some of the stories in the book arced over several installments. Some stories would begin and then reappear twenty or thirty installments later. I was particularly proud that we actually ended the book on episode number 100 as planned.

Q: Is this the first time the book has been published?

BINDER: I've been asked that question a lot. As I said, the book was serialized in print and via email for two years. Then in 2008 JPS published a severely abridged version as a young adult novel. There were some changes that the editors wanted me to make, and I refused, so we stopped the book right after one of the weddings. It was about half way through the book! So I'm thrilled to see the entire novel finally being printed. You might call it the director's cut.

Q: Who are your favorite characters?

BINDER: Aside from Abraham and Adam, I have a fondness for Rabbi Kibbitz and Mrs. Chaipul the caterer. In other stories -- but not in this novel, they get married, but she keeps her name. I also like Reb Shikker, the accountant and town drunk—who can't drink because it makes it hard for him to work. And of course Boris Krabot is sociopath, but one who we begin to understand by the end.

Q: How is it possible in the Internet era to actually make a living as a writer?

BINDER: It's not easy, but I've had the pleasure of spending the past decade as a live performer of spoken-word stories for all ages. While I was writing *The Brothers Schlemiel* I was invited to a storytelling group in Rhode Island called Little Rest. Everyone would tell a story, and since the

group met on Tuesdays, I always had an installment to read. After a while, though they politely suggested I try "telling" a story. I didn't understand the difference between telling a story and reading one. I tried it and it was incredible.

It turned out that my education—from a degree in Mythology at Columbia University to learning Aikido, the martial art for peace, to studying playwrighting, acting and directing at the Trinity Rep Conservatory—gave me all the training I needed to be a professional performance storyteller. My collection *The Bed Time Story Book*, which has sold more than 70,000 copies, gave me access to my versions of a hundred of the best stories from around the world.

Since then I've told my stories to groups of all ages, large and small – from a few to a few hundred. About seventy percent of my stories are original, although some of them don't sound it.

I love the fact that at a story concert, you can have a diverse age group in one place, listening to the same tale that everyone enjoys. It does, however, make reading tours more challenging, because I'd rather tell a story than read from the book.

Since then, I've published two more volumes in the *Bed Time Story Book* series, a fictional autobiography (*It Ate My Sister*), *Stories for Peace* and two more collections set in Chelm. I've also released half a dozen spoken-word albums. A Hanukkah Present was released in print and as an audio recording, and both version won awards!

Recently I've been working with my publishing house to bring more of my work into print. *The Brothers Schlemiel* is one example. We've also been developing an incredible illustrated book called *Cinderella Spinderella*, which tells the famous story with a whole bunch of new "spins." That should be out this fall.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

BINDER: First of all, you certainly don't need to be Jewish. Many of my email subscribers weren't and they loved it. Also, I recently reread the book to prepare it for publication, and I was constantly surprised. I think that readers—even in today's digital era—will enjoy spending time with *The Brothers Schlemiel*.

MORE BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Mark Binder is an award-winning author and storyteller. He began writing his *Life in Chelm* series as the editor of the *Rhode Island Jewish Herald*. These and his hundreds of other stories have delighted readers and listeners around the world in books, magazines, newspapers, audio albums, and even on standardized tests.

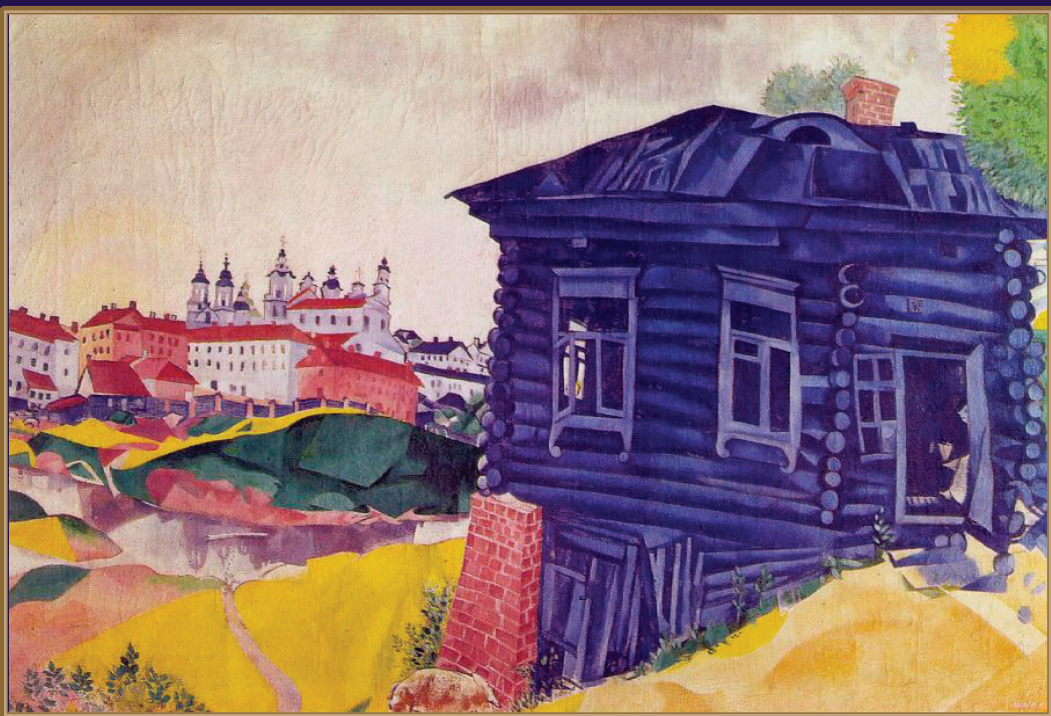
Mark frequently gives talks and performances to audiences of all ages. Sometimes his programs are "educational" but they are always engaging and entertaining. He has the unique ability to read a room and instantly adjust the program based on the audience present. He says that his goal in performance is to transmit joy through language and story.

He is the founder of the American Story Theater, and has taught a college course in "Telling Lies" at the Rhode Island School of Design. He holds a third degree black belt in Aikido, the martial art for peace, and currently practices yoga and centering. In his spare time he bakes bread and makes pizza.

Mark lives in Providence, RI with his wife and their children.

For even more, please visit <http://markbinder.com/>

The Brothers Schlemiel



Mark Binder

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The Brothers Schlemiel

*...a novel of Chelm...
being the reasonably complete adventures
of Abraham and Adam Schlemiel,
identical twins,
born in the village of fools
and confused from birth*

Mark Binder



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The Brothers Schlemiel

the complete and unabridged novel

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The Brothers Schlemiel was originally serialized in the *Houston Jewish Herald-Voice*. The first episode was run in February of 2000. One-hundred installments later, the novel was concluded on January 16, 2002.

An abridged edition, illustrated by Zevi Blum, was published by The Jewish Publication Society in 2008.

Summary: A delicious and exciting novel of mixed identities told in bite-sized chapters. Abraham and Adam Schlemiel are born in Chelm, the village of fools, and are confused from birth. From childhood pranks and encounters with gypsies, thieves, kings, and (maybe) demons, they grow into adults, meeting the responsibilities of family and the joy of love.

Cover illustration by Marc Chagall
“The Blue House”, 1920 (oil on canvas)

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Dedication

For Richard and Robert, the twins

*Those who leave Chelm end up in Chelm.
Those who remain in Chelm are certainly in Chelm.
All roads lead to Chelm.
All the world is one big Chelm.
—I.B. Singer*

Chapter One



Oy

“Oy!”

“Push!”

“Oy!”

“Push!”

“Jacob, stop that!” Rebecca Schlemiel snapped at her husband. “We’re moving a table, not giving birth. Not yet anyway.”

“I’m practicing,” Jacob laughed. “It’s going to happen any day now.”

They both looked down at Rebecca’s bulging belly. It was huge, the size of a boulder and just as heavy.

“I can only wish,” Reecca said. She looked around the crowded kitchen and not for the first time wondered how they were going to fit another person into their lives. The house was tiny. In fact, calling it a house at all was a gracious compliment. Two rooms—a bedroom and the kitchen, plus a privy out back. “Do you think the crib is really going to fit between the table and the cupboard?”

“Relax,” Jacob said. “I measured it myself. The first knuckle of my thumb is exactly one inch long. The distance between the cupboard and the table is...” He began measuring again.

Rebecca looked at her husband, inching his thumb along the floor, shook her head, and put on a pot of water for tea. This was going to take a while.

Jacob and Rebecca Schlemiel lived in the village of Chelm, a tiny settlement of Jews known far and wide as the most concentrated collection of fools in the world. Chelm was celebrated in Yiddish jokes, shaggy dog stories, foolish songs, and the occasional ribald limerick. If someone in Moscow did something stupid, it was blamed on Chelm ancestry. A silly accident in Warsaw begged the question, “What part of Chelm did you come from?” And when a new politician promised revolutionary change, he was laughed down as “another wise man from Chelm.”

Now, the villagers of Chelm did not think of themselves as doltish, stupid, slow, or otherwise mentally impaired. They kept to themselves, rarely traveling further than Smyrna for market day. If they were aware at all of the outside world’s low opinion of them, they ignored it. Or perhaps they took it as a compliment.

After all, as the learned Rabbi Kibbitz once said, “Wisdom shmisdome. What good is knowing everything if you can’t laugh?”

All of this is a roundabout way of saying that Rebecca Schlemiel didn’t think it at all unusual for her husband to measure a four-foot space with his thumb. She saw it purely as an opportunity to rest her aching feet.

This pregnancy business was much more difficult than she’d bargained for. When she’d complained to her mother about back pains, swollen toes, and hair falling out, her mother had laughed. “You think you have problems? When I was pregnant with you, I couldn’t get out of bed. Your father had to use the hay winch to hoist me up in the mornings. Three days before your were born, he had a hernia. He had to hire a horse to pull the winch to pick me up. Then the rope broke and the horse ran away! Now those were

problems.”

These were the kinds of things mothers rarely told their daughters about in advance. Or if they did, they were ignored as nonsense. This was probably for the best because otherwise the human species might never reproduce. The youngest of six sisters, Rebecca wondered what else her mother hadn't warned her about. For several months now, as her belly swelled, she found herself remembering the troubles she'd gotten into as a girl and shuddered at the faint echoes of her mother's shrill curse, “Just wait ‘till you have children of your own!”

“Foo!” Jacob spat. “Rebecca, is my right thumb bigger than my left? You know, I'm not sure the crib is going to fit.”

Rebecca nodded. “I told you that before, but you didn't believe me. No, we had to move the kitchen table to see. Even if it did fit, I wouldn't be able to open the silverware drawers.”

Jacob was a wonderful carpenter, the best in all of Chelm. In the workshop that he rented from Reb Cantor, the merchant, he had built a beautiful crib of the finest polished oak. Unfortunately, he had forgotten to take measurements in their small house before construction. To be honest, he wasn't even sure the crib could fit in the front door. This he didn't dare tell Rebecca, especially not after moving the heavy table back and forth across the kitchen seventeen times.

“What about next to the stove?” Jacob asked.

“Wonderful,” Rebecca said sarcastically. “I'll be making a pot of chicken soup, I'll sneeze, the pot will spill, and boiling water will pour on the baby...”

“Enough!” Jacob interrupted. “We could hang the crib from the ceiling. He'd be out of the way then.”

Rebecca snorted. “I am not going to have my child suspended above me like a bird in a cage. Besides, how do you know it's going to be a boy? My mother had seven daughters and her mother had seven daughters. I'm the seventh daughter of the seventh daughter. You don't think that means something?”

“I need boys to help me in the shop.”

wedged nearly against the far wall, it was clean and tidy and well kept—a good place for a daughter to grow up and learn how to cook.

The water on the stove came to a boil, and Rebecca began the slow process of hoisting herself up out of her chair.

“Oy,” she muttered. Then her eyes widened. “Oh!”

It seemed that Mrs. Chaipul wasn’t going to be wasting a trip after all.

The Lost Father

Only in Chelm could a father get so lost going to fetch the midwife that he misses the birth of his first child. Or perhaps only Jacob Schlemiel. If he’d turned right instead of left as he ran out of his house, who knows, perhaps his entire life would have been different. At the very least he never once would have heard his wife utter the complaint that would haunt him until the day he died, “And your father couldn’t even bother to be present when you were born...”

He didn’t do it on purpose. Who would do such a thing on purpose? He was on his way to the restaurant that Mrs. Chaipul, the midwife, owned. Her establishment, which served the finest chicken soup with the heaviest lead-ball knaidels, was less than two hundred yards from Jacob’s house. He had been there hundreds of times—only last Thursday for corned beef on rye with a dab of mustard...

But Jacob Schlemiel was in such a panic at the thought of Rebecca giving birth that he decided to take a short cut. Never mind that his short cut was in exactly the wrong direction. At the moment he made the decision to turn left, he was certain—absolutely certain—that he was going the right way.

Even then, all could have been well. Chelm is not such a large village. There are fewer than eighty houses clustered around seven or twelve streets (depending on whom you believe and how you count). You could crawl from one end of Chelm to the other in fifteen minutes. Twenty if you got stuck in the mud. Thirty if you enjoyed playing in the mud, as most of the children of crawling age did. So, it was quite reasonable that after a moment of confusion, Jacob Schlemiel would have realized his mistake and looked over his shoulder to get his bearings.

Which is exactly what he was doing when he had the good misfortune to—literally—run, shebang, into Reb Shikker, the town drunk. The two men met, collided, rebounded, and sprawled into the mud.

Now, for many years Chelm did not have a town drunk. Every other village, town, and city had at least one, if not dozens. So, naturally the people of Chelm put an ad in the regional Yiddish newspaper, and in a matter of months the position was filled. Chelmites no longer felt excluded when a visitor from Smyrna boasted of their drunk's exploits. "Why that is nothing compared to our Reb Shikker..." they would answer, their voices trailing off mysteriously. For none of them were quite sure what it was that the town drunk was supposed to do.

Truth be told, it wasn't easy being a drunk in Chelm. No one else in the village imbibed, except on Sabbath and holidays and festivals. No one made vodka, so Reb Shikker had to import his vodka from Moscow. And that was expensive, so he had to work. As it turned out, Reb Shikker was a skilled bookkeeper, but he couldn't keep his figures straight when his head was fuddled. And then there was his marriage to the Rebbe's niece, Deborah, who sneezed at the smell of alcohol. So, although he had been fully qualified for the position, it was now quite rare for Reb Shikker to take even a sip from his flask.

In fact, the first words he uttered after finding himself sitting and splattered were, "I'm not drunk!"

"Nor am I," answered Jacob Schlemiel. "I'm sorry. It was my

fault. My wife is about to give birth..."

"Mazel Tov!" said Reb Shikker.

They helped each other to their feet, and then Reb Shikker remembered his role in the village. "Nu, would you like a drink to celebrate?"

"I'm about to become a father," said Jacob, dusting himself off.

"All the better," said Reb Shikker. He pulled out a steel flask and struggled to remove the cap. "Once you are a father, you can't drink around the children. Besides, vodka will steady your nerves. Ahh. Here."

Reluctantly, Jacob accepted the offer of the flask. He took a long pull and then gasped.

"Good, isn't it?" laughed Reb Shikker. "But it's not good to drink alone. You have a drink for me. I can't, because I have to go back to work."

"All right." Jacob took another. This time his face went as red as borscht.

"Oh! And to the health of your child!" said Reb Shikker.

Jacob took a swig for himself, and another for Reb Shikker. He coughed loudly.

"And the health of your wife!"

Again Jacob drank, and drank again. His eyes crossed.

"You, my friend," said Reb Shikker, taking his flask, "have had enough for both of us. I'm not about to lose my reputation."

With that, Reb Shikker clapped Jacob on the back and trotted off.

By now, on an empty stomach, Jacob Schlemiel was thoroughly kafrated. He stumbled off and knocked on the first door he came to.

Esther Gold, the cobbler's wife, opened the door. Jacob started to explain that his wife was in labor, and that's as far as he got because Mrs. Gold had already been preparing a noodle kugel for just this occasion, and she only had to wrap it in a towel for Jacob to take home. Five minutes later, he was standing outside again with a warm kugel in his hands, still wondering which way to turn.

At every house it was the same. Reb Cohen, the tailor, gave Jacob a teeny tiny suit of clothes. Reb Cantor, the merchant, presented him with a live chicken tied to a string like dog on a leash. And so it went. Everyone was so happy for him and cheerful. Some gave him tea, others gave him bottles of wine. The baker gave him a challah. It was only when, still struggling with boxes, bags, and the fussing chicken, he arrived at the home of Rabbi Kibbitz that Jacob remembered that he was supposed to fetch Mrs. Chaipul.

“Rebbe, Rebecca is in labor and I’m looking for the midwife!”

Jacob

blurted.

“Isn’t she at her restaurant?” asked the rabbi.

“I don’t know,” answered the carpenter. “I forgot to go there.”

“Well, then we’d better hurry.”

The rabbi pulled on his coat, and the two men rushed back toward the center of Chelm.

On the way, they naturally passed right by the Schlemiels’ small house, where they heard a peculiar mewling sound.

“Isn’t that interesting,” said Rabbi Kibbitz. “That sounds just like a child crying.”

“Yes,” agreed Jacob Schlemiel. “And my wife is supposed to be having

a baby any second now...”

Jacob stopped in his tracks. “She’ll kill me.”

“Nonsense,” said the rabbi. “You’re the father. If she killed you, she’d probably be executed as a murderer and the last thing she wants is to give birth to an orphan.”

“Come in with me,” Jacob begged.

“Not a chance,” said the wise old man, shaking his head. “You’re on your own.” He pushed Jacob through the door, and then backed away.

So, overburdened with packages and drink, Jacob stumbled into his house.

There was Mrs. Chaipul, in the kitchen, stirring a pot.

“I’ve been looking for you all over Chelm!” Jacob said.

“Rebecca’s gone into labor.”

“I know. Go on back,” Mrs. Chaipul said, nodding toward the bedroom. “Hurry.”

Jacob dropped the kugel, challah, and various packages on the kitchen table. The chicken ran behind the stove.

Meekly, Jacob peeked his head into the bedroom. There he saw Rebecca, looking tired but beautiful. And wrapped in a blanket was the smallest and loudest creature he had ever seen.

“It’s been six hours!” Rebecca said. “You couldn’t even bother to be

present?

“I’m sorry. I got lost,” Jacob answered. “Is it a boy?”

Rebecca smiled. “It’s... AiEEEEEEE!”

“What?” Jacob shouted. “What?”

“AIYEEEEEEEE!”

Mrs. Chaipul came running. “Get out of the way!” she shouted, shoving Jacob into the kitchen. The door closed behind him.

“What?” he muttered. “I said I’m sorry.”

Sunset, Sunrise

It was to be the longest night of Jacob Schlemiel’s life, and it was just beginning.

A few moments later, Mrs. Chaipul returned with the newborn babe wrapped in a blanket.

“Here.” She handed him the bundle. “Hold this.”

Jacob stared at the package. He held it in front of him in both hands like it was a brisket on a platter. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

The midwife stared up at him. “What, you never held a baby before?”

Jacob shook his head. “No.”

Jacob was an only child born to a thirty-nine-year-old mother. He had grown up without young cousins and nephews. Although he had carved rattles for every family in Chelm, this was the first time that he'd ever actually held a baby in his arms.

“Ai yai yai,” Mrs. Chaipul chuckled. She showed him how to hold the infant close, how to support its head and neck. Then a shriek from the bedroom summoned her back to her patient.

And so, Jacob was left staring at the tiny red ball of a head cradled in his elbow. It was asleep. The whole face was sort of bent and smooshed in, as if someone had flattened it like a pancake.

“You are ugly,” Jacob thought. He would never say such a thing aloud. “I hope you are a boy, because if you're a girl you're going to have some big problems finding a husband.”

Outside, it was growing dark. The sun had just gone down, and the only lights in the house were from the stove and a single candle that Mrs. Chaipul had lit on the kitchen table. In the bedroom, Rebecca's cries subsided, and the small house was suddenly very quiet. Jacob could hear the crackling of the logs in the stove and the occasional footstep of Mrs. Chaipul in the bedroom.

Jacob looked at the little one. “So, you want to play cards?” he whispered. “I'll teach you canasta.”

No answer. Of course not. The little one was asleep. Besides, if the face was so small, how tiny would the hands be? Canasta would keep.

Then there was a shriek from the bedroom. Jacob was so startled he nearly dropped the bundle. The scrunched-up face opened into a look of surprise, followed immediately by a bellowing yell that was surely heard all the way to Jerusalem.

The baby's screech was ear piercing. It stabbed through Jacob's skull like an ice pick into a summer melon. He had drunk too much vodka and not enough of anything else. Jacob lurched toward the bedroom to ask Mrs. Chaipul what he should do, but another shout from Rebecca stopped him cold.

“Make it stop!” his wife shouted. “Please!”

Something was going wrong and that frightened him more than anything had in his whole life. Just that afternoon he and Rebecca had been happy and joking. Yes, they'd bickered a little about where to move the kitchen table in order to fit the crib. Now, with his child screaming in his arms and his wife screaming in the bedroom, Jacob Schlemiel came face to face with the idea of a life he couldn't bear to imagine. What if... Life without Rebecca? What if... His wife and his love? He stood frozen, suspended in fear.

It was the infant crying in his arms that brought Jacob back. The tiny life in his hand, red as a beet and bawling, reminded him that there were other things to do.

But what?

"What can I do for you?" he asked the yowling child, but he could barely hear his own words. "Are you hungry? You must be hungry."

Jacob's eyes darted toward the bedroom, but he was more afraid of interrupting Mrs. Chaipul than he was of the infant's cries.

So, he did the only thing he could think of. He began to pray. And as he prayed, he davened, rocking back and forth, and the baby started to calm a little. But it felt funny, awkward, as if he was going to fall forward or drop the baby by accident, so instead, he began to daven from side to side, the way Rabbi Kibbitz sometimes did. A moment later, the little one was asleep, relaxed in his arms.

The candle burned slowly. Cries from the bedroom rose and fell like the waves of an ocean. Sometimes all seemed calm, and sometimes the fear rose in Jacob's heart, but still he rocked and prayed. Somehow during the night, he managed to switch the baby to one arm long enough to take a drink of water. Then, inspired, he dipped the end of a clean napkin into his glass and watched in pleased surprise as the baby took the cloth and began to nurse.

As the red glow of morning rose from the east, Jacob noticed that his legs ached and his throat was hoarse from prayer. Still, the baby was quiet, sleeping and sucking on the tip of the napkin. Slowly, ever so slowly, he lowered himself down into a chair.

Suddenly, Jacob saw the baby's face twitch.

“No! Please don’t cry,” he whispered. “Hush, hush.”

Then, in the dim light of dawn, Jacob saw the baby’s blue eyes open for the very first time, and he fell in love. What a perfect child! How wonderful.

He barely noticed as Mrs. Chaipul put her hand on his shoulder.

“You have another boy,” she said.

“A boy,” Jacob nodded, smiling back at the tiny one. “So that is what you are.”

Then a wrinkle passed over his face. He turned to Mrs. Chaipul.

“Did you say, ‘another’?”

The midwife nodded and held out another red-faced bundle.

“Twins,” she said. “As identical as I’ve ever seen.”

And they were. Now, Jacob Schlemiel held two babies in his arms. When he looked from one to the other, the only difference that he could see was that the first one was a little bit cleaner and a little less smooched.

The two brothers stared at each other for a moment, and then with one voice they began to howl to the heavens.

“Rebecca?” Jacob shouted over the din as he jumped to his feet to resume his side-to-side rocking. “How is my wife?”

“She’s fine! She’s asleep!”

“She’s the lucky one!” Jacob grinned. “No, that’s not true. We’re all lucky!”

And with that, Jacob Schlemiel began to dance. He danced until, exhausted with joy, he and his two boys crawled into bed with their mother.

The crib could wait another day.

Soon, everyone was asleep, and the Schlemiel house was quiet.

For about ten minutes...

Chapter Two



Bris

“You want what?” Rabbi Kibbitz stared at Jacob Schlemiel. Had he heard correctly? “You want me to perform the circumcisions differently?”

“Well, they’re identical,” Jacob said.

“Twins.” The rabbi nodded. “Yes. They frequently look alike.”

“No, Rabbi,” Jacob said. “These two are exactly the same. I can’t tell them apart. Their own mother can’t tell them apart. There aren’t any birthmarks. Their eyes are the same. They both have ten fingers and ten toes.”

“That’s good.”

“But I don’t know which one is which.”

“Why is this a problem? They can’t be getting into trouble yet.”

“But when they do,” Jacob said, “how will I know who to blame?”

“You’re going to make them drop their pants?”

“I don’t know, Rabbi.” Jacob Schlemiel put his hands over his eyes. “I just don’t know.”

Then he began to weep.

The rabbi sighed. The interview had gone relatively well up till

then. When Jacob Schlemiel had knocked on the door to his study, the rabbi had given him warm congratulations and asked after the health of Rebecca and the new boys. Yes, Jacob had looked tired, but who wouldn't three days after the birth of one let alone two infants?

It was only when Rabbi Kibbitz drew out his paper and pencils to jot down the details for the bris that the confusion began. Usually, it was just a matter of scheduling. According to Jewish tradition, the ritual circumcision celebrating God's covenant with Abraham took place eight days after the child's birth. But, with one boy born at sunset and the other born at sunrise the next day... That was tricky. You might be able to say that they were both born the same day. After all, didn't all the holy days begin the evening before? Still, Mrs. Chaipul wasn't sure whether the first was born just before or just after sunset, and there were the local authorities, who never managed to understand that the Jewish day began at sunset...

So, naturally, the rabbi had stalled by asking about the catering. It was clear that Jacob hadn't given it a thought, perhaps because he hadn't had time for more than a quick bite in days. Obviously, the rabbi had suggested that Mrs. Chaipul handle the whole thing. Jacob had nodded and shrugged.

"So, what are their names going to be?" Rabbi Kibbitz had asked.

"We thought we'd call the first Abraham," said Jacob. "After Rebecca's great uncle's cousin on her mother's side. And then we'll call the other Adam, after my father's brother's father."

Rabbi Kibbitz scratched his head. "Your grandfather?"

"Yes," Jacob nodded.

"Why wouldn't you call the first one Adam, since he was the first human?" Rabbi Kibbitz asked. "Although I suppose Abraham was the first patriarch of the Jewish people..."

"Rebbe," Jacob said. "I would call the first one Adam, or I would call the second one Isaac. I would even call them One and Two. But who can be sure? When I first held them in my arms, I knew which

was which. But the next morning, they both looked the same.”

That was when Jacob had taken the rabbi’s hand and asked if the rabbi could help them figure out which boy was which—surgically.

Rabbi Kibbitz rummaged through his pockets until he found a clean handkerchief, which he passed to the poor weeping carpenter.

“Listen, Jacob,” he said. “What you’re asking isn’t so easy. All my life, ever since I was trained as a mohel so many years ago, I have striven for only one thing during a bris—consistency and perfection. Two things. It’s not like building a table, where if one leg is a little short you saw off the other three to even things out. There’s not a lot to work with. I perform the circumcision the way my teacher taught me, and it’s not something you want to experiment with. Nu? You know?”

Jacob sobbed loudly.

“But wait!” said the chief and only rabbi of Chelm. “I have an idea. We’ll bring in another rabbi! I’ll do one boy, he’ll do the other. We’ll do them both at exactly midnight.¹ And then it won’t matter which was born first. One will be Abraham, one will be Adam. And you should be able to tell the difference. Like a signature.”

His cheeks still wet with tears, Jacob Schlemiel’s face broadened into a smile. “Thank you,” said Jacob. “Rabbi Kibbitz, you are wise like Solomon.”

“Nonsense,” the rabbi blushed. But when the carpenter left, he admitted to himself the possibility. “And Solomon,” he chuckled, “had only one baby to cut!”

In a big city, rabbis are a dime a dozen, but in the tiny village of Chelm there was only Rabbi Kibbitz. He sent a note to his friend,

¹It has been noted by scholars that the circumcision ceremony is traditionally performed during the day. Furthermore, since the new Jewish day begins at sunset it would make better sense to perform one bris before sunset and the other just after. However, and this is an important point, word had reached Rabbi Kibbitz that, on the very day that the Schlemiels were born, the territory that included Chelm had been traded by the King of Poland to the Czar of Russia for fifteen pounds of caviar and two boxes of Cuban cigars. Ultimately, the rabbi thought that for legal reasons it was crucial that the boys be circumcised on the appropriate days according to the Prussian and the Russian calendars.

Rabbi Sarnoff of Smyrna, but it seemed that there had been a baby boom in Smyrna, and the learned rabbi of that town would be unable to assist. So, Rabbi Kibbitz put a free advertisement in the Yiddish newspaper and hoped for the best.

Every day he went to the post office to see if there was an answer, but every day he was disappointed. He didn't dare tell the Schlemiels. Why worry them? They were busy with the babies. Besides, who knew what would happen at the last minute?

Finally, the appointed night arrived.

The Schlemiel twins' bris was a strange event, even for Chelm. Usually, circumcisions were scheduled in the family's home during the day when there was plenty of light, but in this case the ceremony would have to be performed by candlelight. Since the Schlemiels' house was so tiny, the rabbi had argued that with all the guests (the mother alone had six sisters, six aunts, and at least thirty-six cousins) the synagogue's social hall would be a better setting. Now, in those days candles were expensive, but everyone in Chelm was glad to bring a candle or two with the promise of one of Mrs. Chaipul's delicious bris brunches. Chopped liver, corned beef, pastrami...

Rabbi Kibbitz wiped a speck of drool from his lips. He was hungry.

He was also nervous. So far, there was no spare rabbi. Perhaps at the last minute...

But it was not to be. Rabbi Kibbitz waited outside the shul until five minutes before midnight. At last, wearing his best and most confident smile, he went in to perform this most delicate of duties.

The two boys were held, one in each of their grandfathers' laps. He gave them some wine to quell their cries and set his instruments on the table. Rebecca Schlemiel nearly fainted right then, but her mother propped her up.

"You know," Rabbi Kibbitz said to Jacob, "as the father, it is your duty to circumcise your sons, but you may delegate this duty to me. Under the circumstance, perhaps you could do one and I could do one."

Jacob Schlemiel nodded solemnly, then his eyes rolled up into his head and he fell to the ground with a crash.

“It was just an idea,” said Rabbi Kibbitz. He shrugged and began the procedure as Jacob was quickly revived.

But which one should be done first? Which was Adam and which was Abraham? Did it even matter? He had to pick one to start, so he chose the one on his right.

A moment later, the baby began to scream, and the rabbi gave him another sip of wine.

Now, on to the second. Perhaps he could try something a little different...

“Oops!” the rabbi said.

The town of Chelm gasped. “Oops?” Rebecca Schlemiel screamed.

Jacob collapsed to the ground again.

“Relax! Relax!” Rabbi Kibbitz shouted, quelling the near riot. “Nothing’s wrong! They’re both the same. That’s what the ‘Oops’ was. I couldn’t do it differently!”

Of course, in the chaos, the babies were switched once again, and not even Rabbi Kibbitz could tell which was who.

So, one was named Abraham and one was named Adam, but it would be many, many years before anyone in Chelm could tell the difference.

Chapter Three



Termites in the brain

To say that Jacob Schlemiel went temporarily insane after the birth of his twin boys might be overstating the matter. The poor man certainly had a breakdown. His spirit, which had been as strong and as straight as a nail, was bent. His caboose went around the bend, off the track, and into the river. It was as if the mule pulling his wagon down the road of life had suddenly kicked him in the head.

You couldn't really blame him. Jacob had been raised as an only child, which was a rare thing in those days. So, rather than growing up in an atmosphere of barely restrained chaos, he had grown up in a house that had been quiet and calm. His late father had been a great scholar, and Jacob's earliest memories of his mother were the soft hushing noises she made when he cried. In his parents' house, everyone spoke in a soft whisper.

It had, in fact, come as a complete surprise to Jacob's parents when he'd taken up carpentry. "How can you stand all the racket?" his father had asked after he had confiscated the wooden mallet five-year-old Jacob had borrowed from a childhood friend. Eventually, the clamor had gotten so bad (and Jacob's love of constant banging so great) that they'd been forced to send him away from Chelm for his apprenticeship.

Jacob couldn't explain that the noise was something that his heart and ears longed for. The pounding of nails into wood, the harsh rasp of the saw, the repetitive burr of the plane... They were as calming to Jacob as a chapter of Talmud was to his father. He especially loved early mornings, when he unlocked the quiet carpenter's shop, picked up a hammer, and began whacking away with unrestrained glee. The instant transition between silence and din was delightful.

Children, however, were another matter entirely. Hammering at least was under his control. He could stop it when he wanted. The inconsolable screams of two hungry babies with wet diapers were more than the poor man could stand. For one thing it never ended. No sooner was Abraham fed and cleaned than Adam was filthy and hungry. Jacob barely slept a wink at night. Even when the babies were calm, there were dishes to clean, laundry to do, and dinner to make.

Rebecca, bless her soul, was still flat on her back from the effort of twelve hours of childbirth. And of course she had to feed the twins herself, a task that took far more energy than Jacob could imagine.

You would have thought that one or two of her six sisters or six aunts or dozens of cousins might have been able to lend a hand from time to time, but not all of them lived in Chelm, and the ones who did had families of their own to care for.

The grandmothers tried to help, but that was mostly during the day. He could see the feverish look of relief on their faces when he came home from work. The two of them were out the door almost as soon as he took off his coat. So, not only did the carpenter spend a good ten hours a day making the finest furniture for all of the villagers of Chelm, he spent an additional fourteen hours a day taking care of the boys.

"If I could fill the bags under my eyes with gold," he joked to a customer, "I could retire a rich man."

Actually, it was a wonder he survived those first weeks with all his fingers. One day, while hammering together the shelves of

a bookcase, he actually dozed off in mid-blow. He only woke up when the hammer landed on his foot. He didn't dare use his largest two-handed saw for fear of lopping off an arm.

Jacob's day-to-day existence faded into a numbing blur. One morning he woke up, put his pants over his head, dumped a pan of scrambled eggs into his shoes, and didn't notice until he got to work, reached into his pocket for his keys, and found he was still wearing his nightshirt. An ordinary man might scream in frustration at such an occurrence (or conclude that he must still be asleep, having a nightmare from which he'd soon wake up). Jacob Schlemiel shrugged, found the keys in the pocket next to his ear, and went into his shop as usual.

At first, his friends and customers didn't say anything. They knew that Jacob was suffering, but the transition between no children and children was something they'd all been through themselves. Yes, having children was difficult, one of the hardest adjustments of their lives. But you got over it. You got used to it. You muddled through.

It was when Jacob presented Reb Stein, the baker, with a brand new work table that only had one leg that they began to worry. Even a two-legged table might have worked, if it could have been nailed into a wall. But the single leg was in the middle of the table. Reb Stein raised his eyebrows and started to object, but Jacob had fallen asleep on his way out the door. (As it turned out, the table actually worked quite well as a kneading board. Reb Stein gave his four apprentices a huge ball of dough, and they made quite a game of trying to keep the table from tipping onto their side while pushing it over to somebody else's.)

But not all of Jacob's new creations were so successful. The milking stool with the legs sticking up from the seat, for instance, could only be used upside down. And the dowry chest he made for Reb Cantor's oldest daughter, Leah, had seven lids and no walls. Jacob tried to explain that he intended it that way—so that it could be opened from any angle, but Reb Cantor knew that the poor man was blithering.

Still, the villagers of Chelm were nothing if not polite and patient. They knew that sooner or later Jacob Schlemiel would get the hang of living and working and taking care of himself and his newly expanded family. They could wait for their carpenter to return to normal.

But one afternoon, Reb Levitsky, the synagogue's caretaker, pushed on the door to Jacob's shop and was surprised to find it locked. He knocked and peered in the windows, but the shop was dark and silent. Perhaps one of the children was sick. He decided to stop by the Schlemiel house and try to cheer them up with a song.

It was a warm day, so the door to the house was slightly ajar when Reb Levitsky arrived. Inside the house he found Rebecca standing by the stove, stirring a pot of stew.

"Shh, the boys are asleep," she whispered.

"It's good to see you're feeling better," Reb Levitsky said. "Is Jacob napping also?"

"No," she said. "He should be at his shop."

"But I just came from there," said Reb Levitsky. "The door was locked."

"Didn't he leave a note?" Rebecca asked. "He always leaves a note. I wonder where he's gone..."

"He probably went for a walk," Reb Levitsky said.

"Of course," Rebecca agreed. Now that she was feeling better, she had to get the house in order and care for the boys. "He probably just needed some fresh air."

"That's it!" Reb Levitsky agreed. "Don't worry."

After Dark

Until it got dark, Rebecca Schlemiel hadn't really worried. Yes, she was a young mother with newborn twins. True, Reb

Levitsky said that her husband, Jacob hadn't been seen at his carpenter's shop all day, and hadn't left a note, but perhaps the note had blown away.

During the warm light of day, it hadn't even occurred to her that something unfortunate might have happened to Jacob, that he might vanish forever into the foggy wilderness of the black forest that surrounded the small village of Chelm. No, after Reb Levitsky had gone, she had remained quite calm, stirring her stew and taking care of Abraham and Adam.

But then the sun went down. And Jacob was still nowhere to be found.

At night, when there is no moon and the sky is full of clouds, Chelm grows very dark. If you wandered away from the soft glow of hearth fires, lanterns, and candle lights the night became as black as the bottom of a dry well that has been sealed by a boulder. No one went out after dark without a lantern. If you did, you might trip over your own shadow. You could walk ten yards from your house and never find it again. And the only lantern the Schlemiels owned was at home with Rebecca and the boys.

When it was time to light that lantern, Rebecca started to panic. She had waited long enough! Now she couldn't escape the thought that her Jacob might be lost somewhere in the woods, hurt and helpless.

Chelm is not a very large village. In fact, the civilized portion is quite small. Surrounding the motley collection of well-kept houses, well-swept huts, and a few well-loved businesses is a thin ribbon of cleared farmland, and surrounding the farmland is the Schwartzvald. The ancient Black Forest made a wonderful setting for scary stories told in front of a warm fire on a midwinter's night, but in truth the forest was a fearful wilderness that a man could disappear into without a trace.

Perhaps Jacob had gone into the Schwartzvald to cut some wood. Usually he bought his wood from a woodcutter, but maybe he needed something special, a wide board for a table, or a particular length of branch for a chair. Such trips were rare but not unheard

of. If he had tripped over a tree root and dashed his head against a stone...

There were still bears in the woods. And wolves. Packs of wolves. Mothers told stories of those wolves to scare their children into behaving.

Rebecca had only to imagine Jacob lying unconscious on the forest's moss floor while one wolf sniffed at his feet and another licked at the small stream of blood oozing from his forehead! She gave a little shriek and immediately bundled the boys into warm blankets. She couldn't manage the boys and a lantern at the same time, so she left the lantern at home and carried one baby in each arm, feeling her way along the dark streets.

Chelm is not a rich city like Warsaw or even Smyrna, with streetlights at every intersection helping late-night travelers reach their homes safely. No, in Chelm there was only one streetlight, directly in front of the synagogue. It was a well-known fact that if you lost something at night that was the place to look for it because everywhere else it was dark.

At last Rebecca saw the reassuring glow of the synagogue's streetlight. Someone was there, standing right next to the pole! She hurried closer, her heart lifting with every step.

"Jacob?" she said, a smile on her lips.

The man turned, and in an instant Rebecca's hopes vanished like a candle snuffed in the wind. It was only Rabbi Kibbitz, who was smoking a cigarette that he immediately dropped and began stubbing out with his shoe.

Thin wisps of panic began to float like smoke through Rebecca's mind.

"I was enjoying the night air," the rabbi hastened to explain, "but I'm a bit afraid of the dark."

"Jacob is missing," Rebecca said. Abraham (or was it Adam) began to cry. She bounced him gently against her hip.

"Nonsense," said the rabbi. "Misplaced, perhaps. Lost, possibly. But missing? No. How could that be?"

"If he isn't in his shop, and he isn't at home, and he isn't here in

the light,” Rebecca asked, “where could he be?”

“Jacob has parents,” the rabbi said, reassuringly. “He has friends. Perhaps he went to someone’s house for a visit and has lost track of the time.”

“But he didn’t leave a note. He didn’t tell me where he’d be.”

“Child,” the rabbi smiled sadly. “Sometimes a man needs to get away on his own.”

“But whenever he leaves the house he always tells me where he’s going and when he’ll be back.”

“Ahh,” said the rabbi. “Then won’t you feel foolish when you arrive back home to find him waiting and wondering where you’ve gone?”

“He’s at home now?” Rebecca’s face brightened.

“Of course,” said Rabbi Kibbitz. “Have I ever been wrong?”

Actually, Rabbi Kibbitz was famous for being wrong, but no one in Chelm had the heart to tell him. And at that moment, Rebecca was so eager to believe everything was all right that she accepted the rabbi’s statement at face value.

Together they hurried down the dark streets back to the Schlemiels’ house.

In Chelm, one small house looks much like the other. After sunset, and without a lantern, who can tell one door from another? So, of course, Rebecca and the rabbi walked into one wrong house after another. It was a natural and common mistake, and the surprised neighbors tried their best to make the frightened wife and confused rabbi comfortable.

As was only polite, Rebecca and Rabbi Kibbitz accepted the offers of tea and strudel at the Golds’, of Turkish coffee and cake at the Kimmelmans’, and so on. In fact, so kind were the neighbors that (after a snack) each and every one offered to help Rebecca find her way home.

It was quite a parade that finally managed to find its way back to the Schlemiels’ house. By then, Rebecca’s stew was done, perfectly cooked and ready to be served. Since no one in Chelm could ever refuse a free meal, the table was set and the feasting began.

In their later years, Adam and Abraham claimed that evening was their first memory—the warmth of the fire, the laughter of the villagers, the smell of their mother’s rich stew, and the underlying sense of terror and dread. Despite the false laughter and pretend good cheer, everyone in the house was terribly frightened.

Jacob Schlemiel was still not home.

And, one by one, as the hour got late and the guests made their apologies and got up to leave, each and every visitor had the same unbidden notion.

“What a wonderful party,” they thought. “It’s too bad Jacob’s not here.”

One good thing did come of the celebration. With all the excitement, with so many neighbors taking a turn playing with Adam or bouncing Abraham, the boys slept soundly.

Rebecca was not so fortunate. She stood by the window, looking out into the dark night and whispering prayers until the glow of the morning sun began to rise.

Gossip

Three days passed, and there was still no sign of Jacob Schlemiel. Where was he? That question was on the lips of every man, woman, and child in Chelm. When he’d been late for the birth of his first child, everyone had laughed. “He’s just gotten lost again,” they’d joked at first. “He probably turned left when he should have turned right.” Now that he’d been missing for three days, it wasn’t funny any more.

You see, in Chelm, nobody gets lost for very long. It’s not a big place. When a child runs away from home, he usually gets only as far as Great Uncle Mordechai’s house, where Tante Nora feeds him cookies and milk until he decides to go home for a nap. But Jacob

Schlemiel's Tante Nora and Uncle Mordechai had emigrated to America long ago. So where was Jacob?

Chelm is nestled in a valley. To the north are two small round hills that are known on maps as West Hill and East Hill, which the townsfolk sometimes call Sunset and Sunrise. A small stream meanders west of Sunset, down the valley, and through the farmland, skirting the edge of the village. An offshoot of the great Bug River, this shallow brook makes a somewhat revolting gurgling and coughing sound that gives it the name Uherka.

Farms surround the village, and the Schwartzvald, the ancient forest dark forest, surrounds the farms on both sides of the river. Even though visitors to Chelm saw the forest as a bleak and blighted place filled with wolves, bears, and snakes, at least during the daytime, most of the time, it wasn't really so bad. The Black Forest is an integral part of the community. Its wood is used to build houses and furniture and bowls. And from spring until the first snow of winter, the forest's dark moist ground is a glorious source of delicious wild mushrooms, which everyone in Chelm loves to eat. Besides, the Schwartzvald is not really so big. You can see as much on the map. If you walk for an hour or two in any one direction, you're bound to come to a road.

There are only two roads in Chelm. The Smyrna Road goes north between Sunrise and Sunset, through the Schwartzvald, to Smyrna. The Great Circular Road is more mysterious. It heads east into the Schwartzvald, but it is such a long and twisted path that no one in Chelm is certain where it ultimately leads. Anyone who sets off on a journey down that road eventually gets disgusted with the endless forest scenery, turns around, and comes back. Everyone in Chelm knows that if you happen to be lost in the woods and come to a road, all you need to do is take a left and keep walking. Eventually you'll come back to the village.

Jacob Schlemiel ought to have been able to find his way home by now.

While Jacob was missing, Rebecca Schlemiel showed her neighbors what a strong and determined woman could do. Not

only was she feeding and caring for the boys; she had also taken charge of the rescue parties.

The searchers had looked everywhere. They had gone to the tops of Sunset and Sunrise. They had walked along the banks of the Uherka. They had even formed a human chain and arm in arm walked through the forests. If Jacob had been lying unconscious, as Rebecca had feared, they would have found him.

Rabbi Kibbitz sent word to Rabbi Sarnoff of Smyrna, and Reb Cantor inquired with his suppliers. Farmers talked to the cart drivers. Even the wandering peddlers were asked if they'd passed a lost carpenter. The world was not so big. Someone should have seen him. But no one had.

The gossips in Mrs. Chaipul's restaurant talked of nothing else.

"He's not dead," said Reb Gold, the cobbler.

"How do you know that?" asked Reb Stein, the baker.

"Because," answered the cobbler, "you don't hide yourself under a rock to die like a bug. Everyone I know who's dead, they died in their bed, walking to shul, or shoveling snow."

"That's the way most people go," agreed Reb Levitsky, the synagogue's caretaker.

"You think he was kidnapped?" asked Reb Shikker, the town drunk.

Everyone laughed. "What an idea!" "Ridiculous." "Who would want to kidnap a poor carpenter?"

"Who would want to kidnap anyone?" retorted Reb Shikker. "I'll tell you. In Gdansk a gang of thugs kidnapped ordinary men right off the streets and stole their livers!"

"Their livers?" Reb Stein raised a skeptical eye.

"Yes," Reb Shikker continued. "I suppose they had a taste for human chopped liver..."

"That is repulsive!" shouted Mrs. Chaipul. "I'll have no talk like that in my restaurant."

The men, still giggling, quietly apologized.

"It could happen," Reb Shikker insisted at a whisper.

"Shh," hissed Reb Gold. "Do you want to get us all banned from

the only restaurant in Chelm?”

Reb Shikker glanced nervously at Mrs. Chaipul. “Can she do that?”

“Oh yes. Some idiot from Smyrna once claimed her corned beef was too dry and she chased him out with a frying pan.”

“Besides,” said Reb Levitsky, “we’re ignoring the obvious. If Jacob Schlemiel is not lost, injured, or dead, only one thing’s left.”

“What’s that?” Reb Stein asked.

“He’s run off.”

“Run off?” laughed Reb Gold. “Like a dog or a bird?”

“Birds don’t run,” said the baker. “They fly away.”

“Whatever,” answered the cobbler. “Jacob is a man, not an animal. He is married to a woman he loves, has a thriving business, and a beautiful new family. Why would such a man run off?”

“I’ll give you two reasons,” smiled Reb Stein. “Twins.”

“What’s the second reason?”

“Twins,” Reb Stein said. “That’s two reasons.”

“Twins is only one reason,” Reb Gold said. “Twins and something else, now that would be two.”

“There are two boys,” Reb Stein insisted. He held up his fingers. “Adam and Abraham.”

“If you could tell them apart,” said Reb Gold, “that would be two. But they look the same. So, I still say it’s only one reason.”

Reb Stein’s face started to get red.

Reb Levitsky calmly raised his palms. “Friends. It doesn’t matter. One reason, two reasons. What matters is that Jacob has not been himself since the boys were born. I am afraid he’s had a change of heart.”

Everyone nodded, except Reb Gold.

“What do you mean? A lovely wife and two healthy boys. Why would you run from that?”

“Joshua, you don’t have any children.”

“Not for lack of trying!”

Everyone laughed. The cobbler and his wife had only been married for six months.

“No! Children are a blessing. Esther wants five. I say ten. Twelve!”

“Have you lost your mind?” asked Reb Shikker, who had eight of his own. Reb Stein laughed and shook his head in agreement.

“He doesn’t know,” said Mrs. Chaipul from behind the counter.

“I don’t know what?” said Reb Gold.

“Children change everything,” said Reb Levitsky. “A blessing or a curse, wonderful or horrible, that’s all a question of luck and how you look at it. What is indisputable, however, is that from the day your first child is born your life isn’t the same. It is never yours alone again. And that’s not an easy thing to accept.”

“Especially,” concluded Reb Stein, “with twins.”

Meanwhile, not far from the restaurant, Rabbi Kibbitz had just broken the news to Jacob Schlemiel’s seventy-two-year-old mother, Ruth, that her son was missing. He explained that he hadn’t wanted to tell her sooner because he didn’t want her to worry, but...

“Oy, that silly little boy,” laughed Ruth Schlemiel. “I know just where

he is.”

“You do?”

“Yes.” The old woman nodded. “And if he’s not dead, I’ll kill him myself.”

Found Father

Later that afternoon, Rabbi Kibbitz was eating a bowl of chicken soup and explaining the tale to everyone in Mrs. Chaipul’s restaurant.

“She knows where he is?” Reb Shikker asked.

“So she says,” the rabbi answered between slurps. “And no, she wouldn’t tell me where. First she tells me she’s going to kill him, and

then she starts making him lunch. Seventy-two years old, she hops out of her chair like she's nineteen and begins cutting a salami."

"Ruth always was a good mother to Jacob," Mrs. Chaipul said.

"You think she really knows?" Reb Stein asked.

The rabbi shrugged. "I just hope she isn't deluding herself."

At that moment, Ruth Schlemiel was pushing open the door to her son's wood shop. "Jacob!" She shrieked. "Jaay-cob!"

In the tiny attic above the shop, Jacob Schlemiel's eyes popped open, and he sat up so suddenly that he smacked his head on a low rafter. "Ahh!" he yelped, muffling the sound by pressing his lips into his arm.

"I know you're up there!" his mother shouted.

Jacob felt like he was ten again, cowering in fear from the old woman. Still, he kept quiet.

"Do you want me to come up there? I'm not so old I can't climb a ladder. Though my eyesight is not so good. I might miss a step and plunge to my death. Or even worse, I could lie on the dirty floor with a broken leg, screaming. But your shop is closed, so no one would hear me, so I would lie in sawdust and filth wondering if my every breath would be my last."

Jacob rolled his eyes but said nothing.

"The rabbi came to me today," Ruth Schlemiel said.

She set down her wicker basket and, after wiping off a section of the worktable, took out a plate, the sandwich, and a slice of potato kugel. "He told me that my son hadn't been seen in three days."

As soon as the basket opened, Jacob began to smell the garlic from the salami and the sweet paprika scent of the still warm kugel. He'd been hiding in the attic for three days now and had long ago eaten up the few scraps of food he'd found littered around the workshop.

"I remembered that when my Jacob was just a boy, a cute little boy, whenever he was upset he would hide in the attic and pretend he was dead." Ruth Schlemiel reached into the basket and found the jar of pickles she had packed at the bottom. "He was so quiet

we never knew where he was until it was dinner time.”

The sound of the pickle jar opening and the sour smell of the cucumbers in vinegar reminded Jacob of those days, so many years ago.

“Jacob,” his mother said with a sigh, “am I really going to have to come up there and look? Risk my life just to be certain that my little boy isn’t dead?”

It was all too much.

“All right. I’m coming, I’m coming.”

“Did I hear a mouse?” the old woman said. “Or could it be a rat nibbling on my son’s bones?”

“I said I’m coming!” Jacob shouted. He yanked open the trap door, leaned out to repeat, “I’m coming!” and then fell out of the attic, six and a half feet down onto a half-finished table, which collapsed with a crash.

“Are you all right?” his mother asked. “You fell.”

“Ow!” he answered. She knew he was fine.

“Always with the dramatics,” Ruth Schlemiel said, shaking her head but smiling inside. “Just this once you couldn’t use the ladder?”

After Jacob had devoured the sandwich, the kugel, and the entire jar of pickles, he sighed and licked his lips.

“So?” his mother asked.

“Mama,” Jacob answered.

“You still run away from your problems like when you were ten?”

The young man shook his head. “You don’t know what it’s like.”

“I wasn’t thirty-nine years old carrying a little baby named Jacob who screamed his head off for nineteen months with the colic?”

Jacob covered his face and rubbed his forehead. It was a story he had heard all his life. He was an unexpected child, born to a woman who had thought she would never have children. And he had been such a problem—crying, sickly—everyone thought he was going to die.

“I’ve got two, Mother,” he said. “I know it was hard for you, but

I've got two."

"You're only thirty-three. They're babies. They'll grow up. You can manage for a few years."

"It's not that," he said. "Yes, I was exhausted. One or the other was always crying. I didn't mind carrying them around. When they finally fell asleep it was such a good feeling."

"So?"

Jacob grew silent. His mother opened her mouth and then decided to wait. She looked around the shop and thought about putting on her apron and taking a broom to the floor. No. For once, she told herself, sit still and be quiet. She waited.

At last, she could wait no longer. "So?"

"I'm afraid," Jacob said at last. His voice was soft in the dim afternoon light. "I'm a carpenter. I make things out of wood." He shrugged. "There isn't enough money. When it was just Rebecca and myself, then I felt as if we could make do. But now I think about the boys... They're not eating much now, but in a few years it will be like living with voracious wolves. And what about school? And clothes. If you have two children in a row, then you can pass a jacket or shirt down from one to another, but we will need two of everything. And from what will the money come? Tables? Bookshelves? What can I make that everyone doesn't already have? How often does someone need a new table or a chair? Food. Clothes. Shelter. Those are things people need. If they have to, they'll sit on the floor or roll a rock inside."

"Jacob," his mother whispered. She put her hand on his shoulder.

He shook her hand off, stood up and began pacing the room. "Already I hold the boys for eight hours, sleep for four, and work for twelve. Where can I get more money? And if I have that money, will I ever be able to rest? To catch a breath? To have a conversation with my wife?"

"So, you run away? You think that maybe you'll sneak out of your attic, go to Moscow, and forget about this family that you started?"

“I could go to America,” Jacob retorted. “There is work there.”

“Then you would never see your wife,” Ruth said. “And you would miss the blessing of watching your two boys grow into manhood. You can run away if you want, but then you won’t be able to see how good it is, enjoying the fine times and preparing for the difficult days to come. It’s time for you to go back.”

“Do I have to?”

“Yes.”

“I know.” Jacob nodded. “I know.”

“Don’t forget to say you’re sorry. Then beg. If you’re lucky, you’ll only have to sleep under the table for a week.”

Jacob smiled. “It wouldn’t be any worse than sleeping in the attic.” He wiped a tear from his mother’s cheek and kissed her on the forehead. “Thank you, Mama.”

Then he headed home.

Ruth Schlemiel smiled. Her seventy-two-year-old body felt warm and glowing. She looked around her son’s shop and knew that, difficult though it might be, he would do well.

Then her eyes fell on the debris of his lunch and she clucked her tongue.

“Just once you couldn’t clean up before you run off?”

Coming Home

The sun was setting into gloomy gray with the promise of a late overnight frost as Jacob arrived at the door to his house. His hand reached for the latch and stopped. What would he say to Rebecca? What could he say? For three days, he had vanished, hiding in the tiny crawl space of an attic above his wood shop. She must have been worried sick. How could he explain the panic that he’d felt and the thoughts he’d had during the long hours crouched in the

dark?

He rehearsed his excuses... He'd been working on the oversized crib he'd accidentally made too large to fit inside the house, planning to cut it in half and make two cribs! There was a piece of pretty burlled wood in the attic that he would need to finish the project. He'd climbed the ladder and was searching for the hardwood when he'd felt tired. He'd only lain down for a nap, but the next thing he knew it was dark and he couldn't find the trap door without fear of falling down the ladder. Rather than risk certain injury, he'd decided to spend the night. It was so soothing to sleep uninterrupted by bawling and screaming. Late the next morning, he realized how comfortable he'd felt. The attic was cozy and quiet... So he'd just stayed there until his mother had come by to tell him it was time to go home.

It was all very simple, straightforward, understandable even.

But how do you explain that to your wife, who you abandoned

He stood, frozen on the doorstep of his own house, one hand reaching toward his family, but the rest of him inclined to run back to the attic.

And he might have been there still if Rebecca hadn't opened the door and thrown a pail of dishwater and potato peels into his knees. (Chelm had no sewers; garbage was tossed into the street for the goats to eat.)

"Ahh!" Jacob yelped as the cold water soaked through his trousers.

"You!" Rebecca said, that one word both an expression of relief and a piercing accusation. She stared at him.

"I, uh..." Jacob's voice trailed off.

She wanted to scream at him. He wanted to hug her. They got to do neither because at that instant both boys began to cry.

Rebecca rushed to one, and Jacob to the other. They lifted the boys into their arms, held them tight, and together sang a lullaby that they had made up together,

"Little baby go to sleep

Mommy and Daddy are here to keep

*You safe from all the things that are bad
Don't be unhappy, don't feel sad."*

It seemed to take forever, but eventually the tiny bedroom fell quiet as the boys dozed in their parents' arms.

Rebecca and Jacob stood beside each other. Tears ran down their cheeks.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

"I was so afraid," she said, her voice barely louder than her breath. "I thought that I had lost you. And that the boys had lost you. I've been frightened and sad and angry and outraged," she hissed. "And tired and alone. And finally I decided that if this was what God wished, then I would make the best of it. And then, as I planned our life without you, I found myself feeling stronger than I've ever felt in my life."

"I'm sorry."

"Sha." Rebecca scowled. "Don't be sorry for that. Tell me where you've been."

Jacob examined his boots for a moment, wondering if he could put down the boy and wipe them clean. Then he told her everything.

"Your Mamma sent you back here?" Rebecca said when he had finished. The scorn in her voice was so sharp he felt it bite into his chest.

"No," he said. "Yes. No. I was coming. I had already decided."

"Oh, so you decided now that you'd had enough of a vacation it was finally time to check in on your family?"

A dozen angry answers passed through Jacob's mind unsaid. Instead, he let his head drop and again whispered, "I'm sorry. I'm here now."

"Yes, I see that," Rebecca said. "The question is, do we want you?"

Jacob blinked.

"You see, we've been doing quite well without you," she continued. "The neighbors have been generous. I've even been offered a job by Reb Cantor, the merchant, when the boys are old

enough to be on their own. Tell me, why should I allow you back into this house?"

In Chelm, there is a saying, "The wise man is silent when the fool is certain."

Jacob Schlemiel had no idea what this meant, but he knew that Rebecca needed an answer, and he had none. He would go back to his shop to live for a while, and then from there, who knew... Perhaps to America?

"Who am I holding?" He looked at the babe in his arms. "Is this Adam or Abraham?"

"I don't know," Rebecca said, laughing a little. "I still can't tell them apart either. Why do you want to know?"

"Because if I am to leave, I want to tell him personally. I can't kiss the boy and say, 'Farewell, Abraham,' if it's Adam. Years from now, when he grows up, he would say, 'My father left me without even saying goodbye.'"

Rebecca looked at her husband, at the sorrow and remorse in his eyes. "Well then," she said. "I suppose you'll have to stay until we figure out which one is which."

"I suppose I shall," Jacob said. He kissed the sleeping boys on their foreheads. "Thank you, little ones."

Then he looked into the eyes of his wife, their lips inches apart.

"Can you forgive me?" he asked.

"No." She shook her head. "Not yet."

Jacob Schlemiel thought for a moment that his heart would crumble. This was his punishment. He knew many men who lived without the love of their wives, but he'd never imagined that he would join their number. Perhaps some day she would look at him and know that it was love and devotion that had brought him back to their house. Until that day, he would have to make do.

"Please," he said, "let me know if you change your mind."

Rebecca felt angry. Did he really think that forgiveness came so easily? She could justifiably make him suffer for years. Who could blame her?

She shook her head and sighed. "All right. I'll forgive you."

“You will? Really?” Jacob was jolted with surprise. Then he asked, “When?”

“Now,” she said, smiling just a little.

“Already? But I...”

“Shh.” She leaned forward and kissed him—if only to quiet him and keep the boys asleep. “Some day, I’ll ask you to do something for me to make you pay for this. No, I don’t know what it is yet, but I’ll think of something. Don’t worry—it won’t hurt. Now, set the boy down gently and let’s get you out of those wet clothes...”

Jacob Schlemiel grinned with relief.

Of course, if he had known in advance the demand Rebecca was to make years later, he might have kept on his pants and run off to America that instant.

Chapter Four



The Question Is Answered

When did Abraham and Adam Schlemiel begin to realize that they weren't the same person in two identical bodies? On the surface it seems like a foolish question (although in Chelm no question is considered too foolish to be asked), but from the time of their birth the twins themselves hadn't been too sure.

They were identical in every way. Their eyes, their lips, their ears, even the moles on their left elbows were in exactly the same place. They ate the same food, wore interchangeable clothes, and slept in the same crib because the moment their father tried to separate them they began to scream.

Not even their mother could tell them apart. When they were babies, she tried to keep Abraham on the left and Adam on the right. That might have worked, except Rebecca Schlemiel had an impossible time telling right from left. She'd set them down, turn around for a moment, and by the time she looked back, she felt certain that some impish demon must have switched the two boys.

When they were a year old, their grandmother Ruth suggested tying a piece of string around one boy's wrist. If only they'd thought of that sooner! It was decided that, as the oldest, Abraham would