

A Guide to Chelm's Pond for Teachers and Discussion Leaders

Have you ever believed something that others thought was unfounded or foolish? Or have you thought that someone else's belief was foolish? How did you address or resolve those differences, or do they still remain? In what ways have those differences affected your relationship? What can you do when you and another person have different strongly-held beliefs? Do you believe that accepting each others foolishness is a step toward paradise? Do you agree with Bloomie's thinking that Paradise is "*a place where everything that's new seems like something you already know?*" Is it true that "there's no place like home?"

Wisdom, Open-mindedness, and Gullibility

The book begins with the epigram, "Some people are so confident of their wisdom they are unaware of their foolishness."

When Bloomie meets Aufruf, the talking dog, she is not surprised that he can talk. However, Aufruf is surprised that Bloomie is not surprised.

"But you! You're not surprised at all! And I am surprised that you're not surprised! How can you just talk with me like it was an ordinary thing?"

"Well, it is an ordinary thing for you, isn't it?" Bloomie replied. "And as for me, I talk to animals all the time."

"Yeah, but they don't talk back."

"Sometimes they do," Bloomie replied, and then added, slowly, for emphasis, "but you really have to listen."

Aufruf was taken aback. Here was a person who could teach him his own lesson. Perhaps he should be more open-minded to hear other animals. Maybe he wasn't the only one who could talk. On the other hand, his wiser self thought, if you really are so open-minded as to believe the unbelievable, why then, people might consider you a fool (pages 76-78).

Questions

In which characters and stories is this book concerned with wisdom, open-mindedness, and gullibility?

Is it important to be open-minded and willing to change your opinion? Is it important to be decisive and unwavering? If you are open-minded and change your mind, you could be called indecisive or a "flip-flopper." If you are decisive and unwavering you could be called obstinate or "close-minded." What is the difference between open-mindedness and gullibility?

Have you ever believed in something even though others did not? Have you ever been reluctant to believe something even though others did? How do you decide whether to believe something? How do you assess the authenticity or credibility of information and ideas? How can you be open-minded without being seen as a "flip-flopper?"

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ADIRONDACK MENDEL'S AUFRUF



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TTSP

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www.chelmspond.com

Precautionary note

This book can raise serious questions about the nature of God and religion and the meaning of prayer. It is important for teachers and discussion leaders to be comfortable raising these issues with their students and discussion participants. Please read the last two chapters, *Conversion* (specifically the section on pages 86-88, which begins "Rabbi Chayim Shmayim asked Velvel and Malka ..." and page 91, which begins "His father was the one who responded ...") and *Respect* (specifically the section on pages 96-101, which begins "One prayer!"). Additional notes on these topics appear below.

Synopsis

Bloomie, they say, could not find the hole in a bagel; her *challah* is missing a braid; she can't remember which is her side of the *eruv*. Eager for her to be married, her parents conspire to advertise in the personals, and Adirondack Mendel arrives looking for love. But Bloomie won't have anything to do with him. They might never have come together if not for Aufruf, the talking spy dog who learned *a bisse*l Yiddish when he worked for Colin Powell.

In her anxiety, anticipating their marriage, Bloomie implores Adirondack Mendel to gain the respect of the community. But first, he confesses, he's not Jewish. How can he convert since he's an atheist? How can he lead the Shabbos service when he doesn't believe in prayer? Only Rabbi Chayim "who looks to heaven," aka Rabbi Chayim Shmayim, can solve these vexing problems.

It all takes place in Chelm's Pond, where the ridiculous stories of Chelm meet the preposterous tall tales of the Adirondacks and surprise you with compelling questions about the nature of God, the essence of religion, and the meaning of prayer.

You're invited to Adirondack Mendel's Aufruf. Welcome to Chelm's Pond.

Structure of this discussion guide

For each theme or issue that appears in the book I provide a brief review, including quotations and page references. Next, I list a number of plausible discussion questions. Please select, reorder, adapt, and supplement these questions appropriately for your class or group.

1. Questions about the content of the book (e.g., where in the book does this issue arise).
2. Questions that generalize the issue (e.g., what does Judaism say about this issue).
3. Questions that aim to personalize the issue (e.g., what do you think about this issue).

In addition, in some cases I have listed a few resources that you may find helpful.

Wikipedia: Crypto-Judaism <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crypto-Judaism>;
Marrano <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marrano>;
Anusim <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anusim>

Society for Crypto Judaic Studies: <http://cryptojews.com>

Casa Shalom - Institute for Marrano (Anusim) Studies: casa-shalom.com

Foolishness and Paradise

In the chapter entitled *Paradise*, Bloomie believes she has arrived in Paradise, even though she is actually back in Chelm's Pond. The fact that everything in Paradise looks just like Chelm's Pond is explained by her observation, "*So that's what Paradise is, a place where everything that's new seems like something you already know*" (page 39). Her strongly held belief conflicts with those of her fellow Chelmites.

As the days went by, Bloomie continued to refer to the place as Paradise, to which the Chelmites responded, "You're *meshugeh*, this is no paradise." After several days of such confrontations, Bloomie became annoyed, and then angry, and then despairing. Paradise would be spoiled (page 40).

She confides her distress in Rabbi Chayim Shmayim. He accepts her belief that she is in Paradise. Since he is with her, he concludes that he is in Paradise too. Concluding that there must be two people named Rabbi Chayim Shmayim, one in Chelm's Pond and one in Paradise, Bloomie says, "I don't know which Rabbi Chayim Shmayim you are, but I am glad you are here with me" (page 41).

Bloomie's parents "secretly talked to everyone in Chelm's Pond and asked them to accept – or at least ignore – Bloomie's geographical misperception" (page 40).

In the ensuing weeks, everyone accommodated the wishes of Bloomie's parents and made no fuss when Bloomie called the place Paradise, and Bloomie, in turn, offered no argument when someone referred to the place as Chelm's Pond. They were willing to accept each others foolishness, which might well be considered a step toward a genuine paradise. (page 41).

Questions

Sometimes, one person believes something and another person does not. One person might think that the other person's belief is unfounded, that it is foolish. Where in the book does one person believe something that another person does not?

Is it foolish to believe in something, even if some of your observations do not support it? Or if other people's observations contradict it? Is it possible to disagree with someone and yet maintain a good relationship? Are there circumstances where disagreements over beliefs should result in terminating a relationship? What does it mean when someone says religion is partly (or wholly) foolishness, out-dated, or irrelevant?

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Joseph's brothers sell him to Midianite traders and tell Jacob he was killed by an animal (*Bereishit* 37:18-35).

Questions

Are there situations in the story where the characters did not tell or were secretive about the truth? or where what actually happened is questionable?

Does everyone always tell the truth? Are there situations where it is OK to deceive others? to lie or tell only part of the truth? In what situations in the Bible do people conspire to deceive others? Are they justified? What are the short- and long-term consequences?

In what situations might you consider conspiring to deceive others? What justification would you offer? What might happen as a result, positive and negative, short- and long-term?

Hidden Jews

Adirondack Mendel is shocked when his parents say he can't convert to Judaism.

"What do you mean, I can't convert to Judaism?"

"You can't convert to Judaism," they answered, their voices rising. "It's impossible! If your paternal grandfather, Mendel Mendez, after whom you are named, were to hear of this, he would turn over in his grave!"

Adirondack Mendel was shocked. He never expected this sort of reaction. "Why? Why are you saying I can't convert to Judaism?"

"Because you are already Jewish!" his mother replied. "We are descended from *marranos*, Jews who hid their religion and superficially converted to Christianity to avoid persecution. We have been hiding our Jewishness for 500 years!"

Questions

Why didn't Adirondack Mendel know that he was Jewish?

Why were Jews forced to convert? Why did Jews hide their religion? Are there still "hidden Jews" today? How do people know if they are descended from *conversos/marranos/anusim*?

What would you do if you were told either to convert or leave the country? Do you know anyone who has experienced persecution because of his or her religion, ethnicity, nationality, or politics? Do you think there such people who live in your area?

Resources

Jewish Virtual Library: Marranos, Conversos, and New Christians
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Judaism/Marranos.html>

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I would love to hear your suggestions for additional issues, questions, and resources as well as comments of any type. Please write me: Sandor Schuman <sschuman@exedes.com>.

God, the Universe, and the Jewish People

Adirondack Mendel says, "I don't believe in God" (page 73) and later elaborates on what he does and does not believe.

I don't believe that there is a God who watches over us and listens to our prayers. I don't believe there is a God who intervenes in our lives or plays a part in world affairs, who favors one country or one people over another. I don't believe in using 'the will of God' as an explanation for things we don't understand – like why someone became ill, or why there was an earthquake, or how the world was created. I don't believe in a God who 'opens his hand and satisfies every living thing.' ...

Yes, I believe that [that there is more to the world, to the universe, than we understand, and perhaps more than we will ever understand, but that it is somehow coherent and unified in how it works] and history shows that we continue to make more and more sense of the world – at least parts of it – and although we may never make sense of it all, it's only because we haven't figured it out, to the extent that we are capable. ...

Yes, I would call myself an optimist, but it's not a simple or self-confident kind of optimism. I believe that we have the potential to make things better not only for ourselves, but for all people and all living things, but sometimes we get it wrong and we make things worse. So we shouldn't be too confident in thinking that we know what will make the world a better place. We have to exercise doubt. When we hear an explanation, even if it seems to make a lot of sense, we have to keep our minds open to the possibility of another explanation. There is always another side to the story. 'Believe those who are seeking the truth. Doubt those who find it.' Nonetheless, it is our duty to work towards a better world, even though we might not see it done within our lifetimes. ...

I do not think that Jews are necessarily more capable in making the world a better place – others may be just as capable or even more so – but as a people, as a community, we have taken on the mission to do so (pages 86-88).

Rabbi Chayim Shmayim offers a different way to think about God ...

When someone refers to God, when you read of God – obtaining justice for the oppressed, giving bread for the hungry, supporting the weak, the downtrodden, God who is gracious, kind, compassionate, merciful, faithful, loving, righteous – do you think God could serve for you as a metaphor for all of the connectedness and wonder and mystery of the universe and for all of the good intention and action to make the world a better place for all things? (page 88)

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... to which Adirondack Mendel agrees.

Questions

What is Adirondack Mendel's initial understanding of God? How does this change through his interaction with Rabbi Chayim Shmayim?

What does Judaism say about the nature of God? the importance of believing in God? Does everyone have the same idea of God? Should they?

When you say you believe (or don't believe) in God, what do you mean? What is it that you do (or don't) believe in?

Resources

For a series of questionnaires that probe these beliefs, visit www.chelmspond.com/schuman-beliefs-questionnaires.pdf

Wikipedia: God in Judaism en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_in_Judaism

My Jewish Learning: Must a Jew Believe in God?
www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Theology/God/About_God/Must_I_Believe.shtml

Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew, by Neil Gillman.
Jewish Publication Society, 1994.

Religion

When Adirondack Mendel asks his father why he wasn't told he was Jewish, his father says, "Look, Mendel, religions are full of *mishegoss*. We didn't want to bring you up with pointless rituals, nonsensical rules, and irrational stories. It's like Karl Marx said, 'Religion is the opiate of the people.'" To which Adirondack Mendel replies:

Well I don't agree. That complaint is not properly about *religion*, it's about the unquestioning reliance on any particular version of reality or 'brand' of truth. It would be better to say, 'Systems of assumptions and knowledge unquestioningly believed to be true are the opiate of the people,' but for the sake of brevity, '*Answers* are the opiate of the people!' And Judaism is not about answers, it's about questions. It's not all *mishegoss*. It's three thousand years of history, ethics, laws, and customs, and stories that are even older than that. And yes, I will admit there is some *mishegoss*, maybe even a lot of *mishegoss*. But it's not someone else's *mishegoss*, it's your *mishegoss* – it's my *mishegoss*! (page 91).

Questions

What different views of religion are presented in the book?

What is religion? Is being religious the same as believing in God? When people say they are "religious," what do they mean? How many religions are there and what are their similarities and differences? Can a person be religious even if they don't believe in God?

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ahead, take risks, or exercise caution? How does she react to the appearance of the motorcycle gang?

What makes traveling dangerous? How have the dangers of traveling changed over time? Are there particular dangers in traveling alone? What dangers and opportunities do strangers present? When you encounter strangers, what should you do? Are there specific Jewish practices that pertain to traveling and to strangers?

What should young children do when they encounter strangers? Should adults treat strangers the same way? What do you do when you encounter a stranger? What precautions do you take when traveling? If you travelled alone, what additional precautions would you take?

Resources

Hospitality
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/judaism/hospitality.html>
<http://www.torah.org/features/secondlook/hospitality.html>
<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/7905-hospitality>

Gomel Blessing
http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/judaica/ejud_0002_0007_0_07637.html
<http://www.answers.com/topic/gomel-blessing>

Traveler's Prayer
https://www.hillel.org/jewish/rituals/tefilat_haderech/default
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tefilat_HaDerech
http://urj.org/learning/forparents/parent/?syspage=document&item_id=11100

Psalm 121
<http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt26c1.htm>
http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/732833/jewish/Psalm-121.htm

Conspiracy and Deception

Without her knowledge, Bloomie's parents "conspired to pool their meager resources and place advertisements in the Jewish newspapers and on matchmaking websites" (page 53) and Adirondack Mendel responds even though he believes he is not Jewish. Aufruf claimed that he was a spy dog and "was assigned to work with General Colin Powell when he was Secretary of State." But his owner says, "whatever he's been telling you – it isn't true. That dog is the most unreasonable, unmitigated, unconscionable, goldarndest liar" (page 70). There are many aspects of Adirondack Mendel's stories that are questionable (for example, in The Fly Fishing Contest and Castle Rock chapters).

There are many instances in the Bible that can be characterized in terms of conspiracy and deception. For example: Abraham and Sarah tell King Abimelech they are brother and sister (*Bereishit* 20:2-5), Rebecca helps Jacob disguise himself as Esau to fool Isaac into giving Jacob his blessing (*Bereishit* 27:6-29),

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What is a stereotype and how does it differ from a reputation? In what ways are stereotypes useful? harmful?

How might you be stereotyped by others? In what ways is that stereotype true? false? most hurtful?

Treatment of Animals

Without a *shokhet* to slaughter animals, the café is vegetarian (pages 24 and 45). When Bloomie decides to name the café “The Broiled Beet,” she also decides to embrace vegetarianism as an “ethical, healthful, and environmentally conscious diet” (page 46). The Broiled Beet menu notes that “hens whose egg-laying capacities have run their course are accommodated for the remainder of their years at the *Chelm's Pond Home for Has-been Hens*” (page 48). Rabbi Chayim Shmayim says, “Stop eating! We have to feed the dog first” (page 74). Both Adirondack Mendel (page 71) and Bloomie (page 78) say to Aufruf, “You are your own dog.”

Questions

What instances in the book reflect a concern for the well-being of animals?

What does Judaism say about how animals should be treated? What do we mean by *Tza'ar Ba'alei Chayim*? What are some Jewish laws that specifically address the treatment of animals and how would you generalize them?

If you have a pet, in what ways is your treatment of that animal consistent (or inconsistent) with Jewish law? How do your food choices reflect Jewish concerns for the welfare of animals? for stewardship of the earth?

Resources

Judaism 101: Treatment of Animals www.jewfaq.org/animals.htm

Jewish Vegetarians of North America www.jewishveg.com

Jewish Vegetarian Society www.jvs.org.uk

Hospitality: Strangers and Dangers

Bloomie travels alone on her trip to Paradise. She stops for the night at a roadside picnic area and goes to sleep. She is awakened when a motorcycle gang arrives. She is concerned for her safety: “A *motorcycle gang*, she thought, *and me all alone in the night, far from the nearest house or business, and even further from my people.* ... She felt in her pocket for the copy her parents had given her of *The Traveler's Psalm*.” Her inclination to be hospitable overcomes her anxiety: “... she adopted the role of hostess whose duty it was to welcome her fellow travelers” (page 36).

Questions

When she travels to Paradise, what personal attributes does Bloomie exhibit? For example, is she adventurous, foolish, or naïve? Does she plan

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Are you a religious person? To what degree, and in what ways, are you religious?

Prayer

Adirondack Mendel says, “I don't believe that there is a God who ... listens to our prayers” (page 86). At the end of the same paragraph, quoting from *Ashrei*, Psalm 145:16, he says, “I don't believe in a God who ‘opens his hand and satisfies every living thing.’” Responding to the idea that he should lead the congregation in prayer, Adirondack Mendel says, “... what good would it be, I don't even know what I'm saying. To me, they are just Hebrew sounds” (page 95). Rabbi Chayim Shmayim says, “... if you lead the prayer with *kavannah* and the congregation shares that meaning and intent with you, then perhaps, *im yirtzeh HaShem*, the prayer will have its intended effect.” To which Adirondack Mendel replies, “But I don't believe in prayer ... It's not meaningful to me.” Rabbi Chayim Shmayim writes on a card, “The prayer changes the prayer” and Bloomie and Adirondack Mendel wonder and talk about what it means (pages 97-98). Finally, Adirondack Mendel agrees to conclude the *musaph* service. When he sings *Sim Shalom*, everyone in the congregation focuses intently on the prayer and its meaning. The book concludes: “some people said that it was just another Adirondack Mendel tall tale, but others said that it really happened, that for the next ten minutes, over all the earth, there was peace.”

Questions

What does Adirondack Mendel think about prayer?

Can people bring about change by praying? Does prayer really work, or is the efficacy of prayer a “tall tale”? Are there different types of prayer? If so, do they serve the same or different purposes? Is everything that is read, said, or sung in a religious service some form of prayer, or are there other types of things?

What do you think about prayer? Do your prayers really work? Is it true that “the prayer changes the prayer”? If so, in what sense? When you read the closing words of the book, “some people said that it was just another Adirondack Mendel tall tale, but others said that it really happened, that for the next ten minutes, over all the earth, there was peace,” what thoughts or questions did it bring to mind? What does it mean to you?

Halakha

The people of Chelm are bound by Jewish law and practice. For example, they are vegetarians because there is no *shochet* in the community and they cannot afford to import kosher meat. Even in the instances where *halakha* is not strictly observed – for example, Raizel and Shlomo “didn't always observe *Shabbos*, ... didn't go to *shul* on all of the holidays, ... didn't keep everything in their kitchen kosher” (page 83) – there is understanding and respect for *halakha*.

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The story of *The Village Well* illustrates, allegorically, the practice of building a fence around the law, as well as the role of tradition in preserving Jewish practices. The story tells how a little boy falls down the village well and then is rescued. To prevent such an event from re-occurring, the Chelmites build a wall around the well, and then because someone could trip over the wall they put up signs, and then because the signs wouldn't be visible at night they hire someone to shine a flashlight on them, and then because a blind person might walk by they have the signs read out loud, and then because the person with the flashlight might fall asleep on the job they build a fence around the whole thing. In the end, convinced that – in spite of their efforts – the protections around the well are still inadequate, they replace the well with a water pump and fill in the well, but then retain all of the protections around the well anyway.

While using one of the Chelm story motifs (where a solution to one problem creates another) the story can be seen as a metaphor for “building a fence around the law” and implicitly raises a question about how many protections are needed and whether such protections should be maintained even if some or all of the original reasons for their creation no longer apply, a question of continuing relevance (e.g., various recent responsa regarding *kitniyot*).

There are a few instances in the story that deviate from traditional *halakhic* norms: an older man hugs an unrelated young woman (“Rabbi Chayim Shmayim, imagining how devastated Bloomie must feel, held and hugged her as she sobbed” – page 31); a woman serves on a *Beis Din* (“Rabbi Chayim Shmayim asked Velvel and Malka, the two most knowledgeable and observant people in Chelm’s Pond, to serve with him on the *Beis Din* ...” – page 86); a dog, is permitted in the synagogue (“Aufruf advanced to the *amud* and stood on his hind legs” – page 85).

Questions

Are the people of Chelm observant Jews? In what ways is *halakha* observed or violated in the story?

How is *halakha* established? When should *halakhic* practices be preserved and when should they be modified? What distinguishes *halakha* from other Jewish practices?

What is the relevance of *halakha* in your life? What do you think about the different approaches to *halakha* as practiced by different segments of the Jewish community?

Resources

My Jewish Learning: *Halakhah*: Jewish Law
www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ritual/Jewish_Practices/Halakhah_Jewish_Law_shtml

Wikipedia: *Halakha* en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halakha

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Reputation

Bloomie's reputation as a fool was established in her youth. Although she transforms herself into a creative, ambitious, and responsible young adult, she can't shake her reputation. Drawing on a number of the early stories in the book, Bloomie sums up her situation when she says,

When they see me they see the girl whose *khallah* is missing a braid, who could buy her *tefillin* at half price, who couldn't cut *gefilte* fish with a sharp knife. The fool who had a chicken pee in the diner, didn't know she was out of flint, lost all her winnings at the racetrack, thought she was in paradise (page 94).

Adirondack Mendel has a reputation as well, based on the stories he tells (which, as Bloomie notes on page 93, not everyone believes). As they contemplate marriage, Bloomie insists that they “need the crown of a good name,” bringing about the climactic ending of the story. Frank and John (who appear in the story, *Rabbi Chayim Shmayim*) have earned reputations as *nishtgutnicks*. Rabbi Chayim Shmayim has a reputation as someone who can solve any problem, although he goes about it in a strange way. This reputation is, of course, well-founded.

Questions

What are the reputations of the characters in the book? Are they well deserved? How does Bloomie feel about her reputation?

What do Jewish writings say about reputation? What does it mean to have a reputation? Can a person have more than one reputation? How are reputations established? Once established, how can people change their reputations?

Do you think your reputation is important? What kind of reputation do you want to have? What kind of reputation do others think you have? What have you done to establish your reputation? What have you done that is inconsistent with the reputation you want to have? If part of the reputation you have gained is different from what you would like, what can you do to change it?

Stereotypes

Aufruf the dog is stereotyped – as a dog. Most people can't hear him speak because they relate to him as a stereotypical dog rather than the unique dog that he is. Because he is a dog, it's inconceivable that he can speak, notwithstanding that he's fluent in English, speaks *a bissel* Yiddish, and is proving to be an excellent student of Hebrew. Other stereotypes are the store clerk and the mother-in-law, both of which appear in the story, *Deception*.

Questions

What stereotypes appear in the story?