

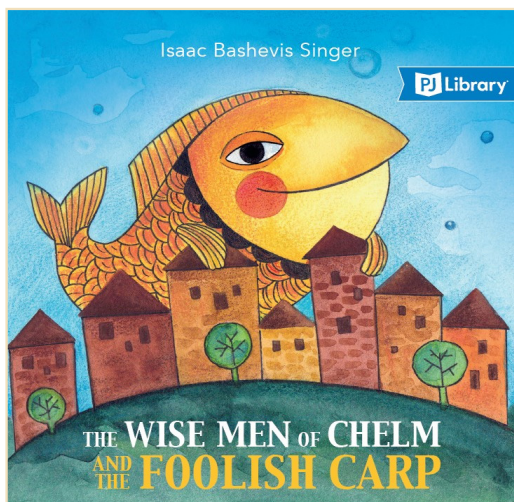
written by

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{ **Can you be wise AND foolish?** }



Shtetl Life

Chelm is an example of a shtetl, an Eastern European village where many Jewish communities thrived for centuries, and this story gives us a taste of shtetl life. Fish was the food to eat on Shabbat – for rich and poor alike. Gronam Ox, the bumbling leader of Chelm, represents the rabbis and community leaders to whom shtetl residents turned for advice (hopefully they were wiser than Gronam!). Shtetl jobs likely included “fish dealer” and “water carrier.” Residents may even have fed leftover Shabbat challah crumbs to shtetl fish! For both the wise and the foolish, there was always lots of life in the shtetl.

HANDS ON!

Make Fish Bathtub Sponges

These are a lot more fun than having a real carp in your bathtub.

Cellulose dish sponges in a variety of colors
Thin cardboard (empty cereal boxes work well)

Marker
Scissors

Use the marker to draw fish shapes on the cardboard that are around the same sizes as your sponges. Cut the fish shapes out of the cardboard. Now trace the edges of the cardboard fish on the sponges, and then cut the excess sponge off. (If you like, you can also draw the fish shape directly on the sponges and then cut them out.)

Use your fish as bathtub or pool toys. For a fun game, set up a bucket and try to toss the fish in. Now that foolish carp will never get away!

Laughing All the Way

Laughter can keep us from taking life (and ourselves) too seriously. Jews seem to have realized this a long time ago and have been telling funny stories ever since! Good thing, too, as laughter has also helped us get through hard times. Stories about Chelm – an Eastern European Jewish town of fools – portray shtetl life in a whimsical, lighthearted way, when real life in that time and place was not so easy. So remember the townspeople of Chelm the next time you’re feeling down, and try laughing it off! To learn more, visit pjlibrary.org/foolishcarp.

Language Powerhouse

The original Chelm stories were written in Yiddish, a combination of German, Hebrew, and other languages, and the mamaloshen (“mother tongue”) of the shtetl. The author of this story, Isaac Bashevis Singer, was a champion of Yiddish literature. Born in Poland in 1902, he became the world’s most widely read Yiddish writer. Even after moving to the United States in 1935, he continued to write novels, short stories, and essays in Yiddish. When Singer won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978, he said in his acceptance speech, “Yiddish has not yet said its last word. Rich in humor and in memories, it is the wise and humble language of us all, the idiom of frightened and hopeful humanity.”

TALK IT OVER WITH YOUR KIDS

IN this story, what were some of the foolish mistakes people made? Have you read any other stories about the people of Chelm?

WHAT do you think it would be like to live in a place like Chelm?

THIS story was originally written in Yiddish. Do you know any Yiddish words? Which ones?