

בְּצֹחוֹ קָעָרְבַּ יְלִין בְּכִי וְלִבְקָר רָנָה

One may lie down weeping at nightfall; but at dawn there are shouts of joy – Psalm 30:6

Through the rough-cut lens of memory, I watch helplessly as my sweet, 6-year-old self tucks under the kitchen sink and swallows a fistful of candy. Only it's not candy. It's de-wormer. Meant for the dog, I suppose (though I don't remember having one). My older brother delights in the spectacle and convinces me that I'm going to have puppies. I resolve to give them Biblical names. Joy turns to grief as my mother forces her hand down my throat.

It was a devastating loss (the puppies!). Paradoxically ridiculous and sad. But as tradition teaches – and as the silver/celluloid slapstick of *The Three Stooges*, the irreverently self-referential *schmaltz* of the Borsht Belt set, and the pulpy satire of *Mad Magazine's* '(un)usual gang' have repeatedly, gleefully, and graphically shown – there's *gelt* in the guts of memory, history, and other hard to hear stories. And by some miracle of accident and alchemy, spilling mine turned literal poison into figurative paydirt.

Learning not to eat 'candy' from under the counter is, of course, its own reward. But, as story influences identity (and descent enables arising), this gritty kitchen sink drama also taught me what it means to truly believe in something *and* to have that belief challenged; that it's okay to be curious, but to exercise caution; that trust is earned, forgiveness is a process, and that repair is possible; that joy and grief are inextricably linked (and that children grieve too); that biology doesn't determine identity and that when it comes to bodies, binaries and bloodlines, it's best not to make assumptions. Perhaps most importantly, I learned to be humble and to maintain a good sense of humor when mythologizing (or pathologizing!) my personal experiences.

Of course, not all that glitters is *gelt*. My training as a therapist taught me that. Still, it takes guts to survive this life. My training as a therapist taught me that too. And like rest – or learning to see in the dark – reveling in life's absurdities (and resolving to laugh about them) is an absolute superpower. It is also an act of resistance. And of justice. Humor *feels into* our experience and pulls joy from pain. Even when it defies convention, humor decenters hate, displaces fear, and offers a subversive counternarrative (if not a *tikkun*) to suffering. Liabilities notwithstanding – some things are just not funny – humor has moral, political, and spiritual relevance. Liabilities notwithstanding – I mean, sometimes *I'm* just not funny! – who I am and how I identify as a rabbi, including how I think about justice, is informed as much by joy and by the *Chelemer Chochamim* (the wise ones of Chelm) as by the *Chumash* or other Jewish texts.

Written phonetically, Chelm (חלם) is etymologically related to *halom* (חלם), the Hebrew word for dream. And like the delightfully unhinged Maggid of Chelm, whose wisdom routinely defies logic (and whose solutions to the challenges of community life are often theoretically correct, if practically absurd), I am a dreamer. And though I preach a strange Torah (tickled as I am by the peculiarities of the text) I, like the people of Chelm, dream of justice.

Like when the townspeople bought a bag of holes from the poor woodcutter and his wife (who had an *entire bag* of holes, but little else) in order that all of Chelm might have proper (some might say *holey*) matzah for Passover. Or when the people of Chelm realized that simply setting a place at the table for the poor woodcutter and his wife was a poor substitute for justice and set out to buy some from the next town over (only to discover that justice can't be bought and that they would need to make their own).¹

Like the people of Chelm, I am a dreamer who dreams of justice (and of puppies named Obadiah). I am also an experienced clinician with a solid foundation in human behavior and cognition; a pastoral care provider who understands that it's all about relationships; and a master carpenter who, with a clear sense of process and of repair, imagines castles in the air (or *seders* in Chelm) but who, as a rabbi, aims to build communities of belonging everywhere else.

Indeed, I am a rabbi whose dream it is to build sanctuary in community through accessibility (with intention and by design); a rabbi who honors the past with a forward-facing responsibility to the present (however painful the present may be) and a critical eye to the future; a rabbi who can hold what's hard, help fix what's broken and, with unflinching optimism, celebrate joyously.

¹ Frankel, V. 2019. *Chelm for the Holidays*. Kar-Ben.