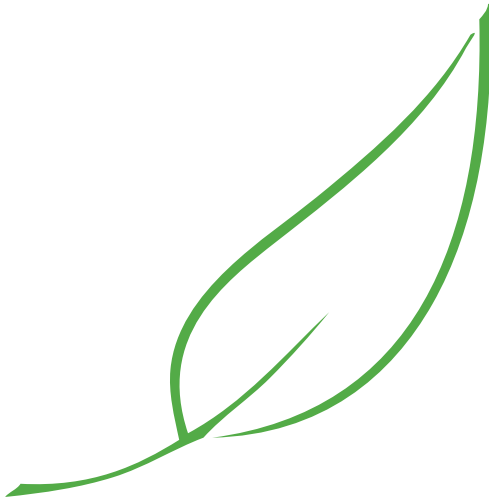


Cockamamie Tales From Chelm

By Claudia Haas



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COCKAMAMIE TALES FROM CHELM

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SYNOPSIS: Norman, a decidedly silly angel, accidentally drops his entire sack of "foolish" souls into one valley and creates the town of Chelm. The play chronicles Norm's efforts to help the sweet, silly people learn to take care of themselves. Culled from the folklore of the *Wise People of Chelm*, the play weaves together five tales from Chelm and has a rich assortment of silly characters in which each actor can shine. The stories culminate in a joyous and "cockamamie" celebration of the birth of their town.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(8 females, 5 males, 9 either)

NOTE: *Families are grouped together.*

HENRIETTA/HENRY (m/f)Head Stork Angel; wise, hardworking.
(52 lines)

NORM/ NORMA (m/f)2nd Stork Angel; foolishly wise.
(64 lines)

VOICE OF GOD (m).....To be doubled. *(2 lines)*

VELVEL (m/f).....No-good robber. *(35 lines)*

DUBKA (m/f)Robber. *(24 lines)*

MINAH (f)Kreindel's rich, visiting sister. *(14 lines)*

RABBI ZELIG (m)As wise as can be expected in Chelm. *(14 lines)*

BATKA (f).....Rabbi's gushing Rabbi's wife. *(34 lines)*

SISEL (f).....(age 8-10) Zelig and Batka's daughter.
(17 lines)

- YOSSEL (m).....Roofer, simple. *(3 lines)*
- KREINDEL (f).....The self-appointed know-it-all of Chelm;
wife. *(43 lines)*
- FEIJA (m/f).....Daughter age 12-14. *(14 lines)*
- DEVIRA (m/f).....Daughter age 10-12. *(8 lines)*
- TELVEL (m).....Tailor. *(9 lines)*
- REINA (f).....Telvel's well-meaning wife. *(12 lines)*
- DROZHA (m/f).....Daughter age 11. *(14 lines)*
- CHANI (f).....School teacher – poor; very, very poor.
(36 lines)
- YACHNA (f).....Chani's daughter age 11. *(13 lines)*
- HERSHEL (m).....Wealthy, braggart. *(21 lines)*
- ZINDEL (m).....Hershel's son age 12 – a bit of a smart-
aleck. *(29 lines)*
- SHAYNA (f).....Owner of fish market. *(18 lines)*
- LEBA (f).....Shayna's sister – negative. *(14 lines)*
- YITTA (f).....Fortune teller, matchmaker. *(18 lines)*

PRODUCTION NOTE

The angels, robbers and children could be male or female. Some of the children could be eliminated or more children could be added.

ACT ONE, SCENE 1
The Creation Of Chelm

AT RISE: *All is dark. It is the middle of the night. Two “stork-angels” are wearily coming down the aisles with empty sacks. NORM (or NORMA.) is exhausted from a night of dropping off souls. Sneezing and yawning, he is ready for rest. Moaning about his existence is his favorite thing to do. HENRIETTA (or HENRY.) is a martyr. She works side by side with NORM and will put up with anything because she has a great sense of importance as the “Angel who drops off souls.”*

NORM: What a night, Henrietta! My wings are like lead. My head beats; my nose runs. An angel can go mad from all this work! Did I tell you that during the ocean crossing the salty spray burned my eyes and I couldn't see?

HENRIETTA: Yes. You did mention that, Norm.

NORM: But did I mention that my head is so stuffed I cannot think?

HENRIETTA: Numerous times.

NORM: I think I picked up a virus when we crossed the ocean.

HENRIETTA: Angels are immune to viruses, Norm.

NORM: Maybe I have allergies. Ahh-choo! Henrietta! Maybe I'm allergic to you.

HENRIETTA: Stop your moaning, Norm. You're lucky to have such an important position. Dropping off souls is like spreading blessings wherever you go. You should do this with joy.

NORM: I am filled with joy! The more I complain, the more joyous I become. All that talking gave me a headache. I need to rest. Where is my cloud?

VOICE OF GOD: Henrietta! Norm! I have a mission for you.

NORM: But –

HENRIETTA: Shhh! No buts. This is your boss speaking. I'll get the new sacks! Give me your empty one.

NORM: But my head . . . my nose . . . my allergies . . . ahh-choo!

HENRIETTA: Shhh! Do you want to be demoted?

NORM: I don't know. Would the new job be easier?

VOICE OF GOD: Henrietta! Norm! Where are you?

HENRIETTA: I'm on my way.

NORM and HENRIETTA come up on stage in front of curtains, still in darkness.

NORM: *(To audience.)* I do not know where He gets His inspiration these days. We have been flying all over the planet. Where is it written that if you create a planet, you must fill it with people? Already we have populated half the earth with souls. The wise and the foolish. If you have too many wise souls, the people will do nothing but ponder great thoughts and nothing will get done. But, if you have too many foolish souls, nobody will ever figure out how to do things properly. So we compromised – one-half wise people and one-half foolish people. I, of course, am in charge of the foolish people. Or the wise people – it depends on your point of view.

HENRIETTA: Norm, come quickly. The Boss wants this done tonight. Here's your half. *(Mimes placing souls in both bags.)*

NORM: Another heavy one. Can't He stop creating? What is this – the sixth day already?

HENRIETTA: He was looking pretty tired. He did say He'd rest tomorrow. We're off. Follow me.

NORM: We're not flying over any oceans again, are we??

HENRIETTA: Oh no! Not to worry!

NORM: What a relief.

HENRIETTA: We're flying up mountains this time.

NORM: Mountains?

HENRIETTA: Move it, Norm! The sun will be up soon and we haven't reached our destination. *(Moves NORM across stage.)*

NORM: Stop nudging me! All this running around the earth is getting to me. And my eyes are watering. I can hardly see!

HENRIETTA: Norm! Watch out on the right. See it? In the clouds? Do you see the mountain, Norm?

NORM: Ahhhhhh – Ahhh –

HENRIETTA: Norm! Turn right! Right! You're going to crash! Watch out!!!

NORM: - CHOOOOO!

A scream and sound effect of a crash are heard. NORM crashes into curtain and falls. NORM has dropped his bag of souls and crashed into the mountain.

HENRIETTA: Uh oh.

END OF SCENE

ACT ONE, SCENE 2

The Townspeople Of Chelm

AT RISE: *The stage is lit revealing a small town nestled between two mountains. There is a Town Square in the middle. Stage right has a Fish shop. Stage left shows us the Tailor shop. On either side of the stage could be a suggestion of a mountain. Up Center could reveal the door of a synagogue. Off to the side or in back of the audience, we find NORM perched on his cloud, which could be a pillow. Be creative. HENRIETTA enters. The TOWNSPEOPLE are frozen on stage.*

HENRIETTA: Anything new down there?

NORM: What a job I have! Guardian angel to the people of Chelm!

HENRIETTA: You have no one to blame but yourself. If you drop an entire sack of silly souls in one place, you have to know there's a price to pay. Don't mess with the "Big Guy."

NORM: Those were the good old days. Flying around the earth. Making deliveries.

HENRIETTA: What are you talking about? You did nothing but complain.

NORM: Henrietta, please remember that complaining makes me happy. Now look at me. Sitting up here just watching and waiting. Why am I just watching and waiting?

HENRIETTA: Creating the town of Chelm was not in the plan. Think what you did! You ran smack-dab into a mountain. You dropped your bag. You dropped all the foolish souls into one place. Someone needs to look out for them! You must protect them – from themselves.

NORM: Don't remind me. I must watch over them for all time or else – there is nothing scarier than an "or else" held over your head for eternity.

HENRIETTA: There are a lot of people down there. They seem to be thriving.

NORM: I should do as well. Look! Souls found other souls and marriages were made and the town grew. . . And then the children came. And the town grew some more! STOP GROWING ALREADY!

HENRIETTA: Soon they'll be too large for their little town!

NORM: I know! But what's a guardian angel to do?

HENRIETTA: Norm! It looks like they're arguing!

NORM: It's a town meeting. That's what they do. Watch.

The town comes to life.

HERSHEL: So it is decided. We have grown too large for our little town, no?

ALL: Yes!

CHANI: And you need a school.

RABBI ZELIG: But begging your pardon, don't children learn all they need to know at home?

Peering closely at CHANI.

Do I know you?

REINA: I don't know her. Does anyone know her?

CHANI: I am your school teacher. But how can I teach if you have no school?

YITTA: We have no school teacher! Rabbi Zelig, do we have a school teacher?

RABBI ZELIG: I do not know if we have a school teacher. I do know that we have no room.

YACHNA: Excuse me, but we all already know there is no room.

ALL gasp at the nerve of that child to speak up to the RABBI.

KREINDEL: This, we need yet? Such a child! Who is this child?

CHANI: She is my daughter, Yachna.

BATKA: I know you! You are the school teacher.

KREINDEL: We have no school teacher. Yossel, do we have a school teacher?

YOSSEL appears to be sleeping standing up.

Yossel! Wake up! We are in a town meeting! We are with the Rabbi!

HERSHEL: Yossel! You dare to sleep when the Rabbi speaks.

YOSSEL: It is the only time I can sleep. Our Rabbi is a learned man. I trust him. So when he speaks what do I have to stay awake for? I know we are in good hands.

KREINDEL: My husband is a wise man. So, what's the answer?

TEVEL: Why, it is obvious. There is nothing but space for miles and miles. We need to use some of that empty space.

LEBA: But we are nestled between two mountains. All the space is past the mountains. How do we create room without having to climb over the mountains every day?

ZINDEL: I know! Move a mountain! And then we will have more space.

ALL: *Move a mountain?*

RABBI ZELIG: Such an idea! Why, there has not been such an idea posed since the days of Solomon! Therefore, I proclaim that tomorrow when the sun rises, each person in Chelm shall position themselves by one of the mountains and we shall push and push until we have created space!

ALL freeze onstage.

NORM: I can't stand it! They're going to move a mountain!

HENRIETTA: Let's wait and see what happens tomorrow.

NORM: I'm never going to get off this cloud.

END OF SCENE

ACT ONE, SCENE 3*Moving A Mountain*

AT RISE: *It is early the next morning. The sun is just coming up. The TOWNSPEOPLE are positioned by a mountain and getting ready to push.*

YITTA: For this I was born? To schlep up a mountain and push?

SHAYNA: Shh, Yitta! Have a little faith!

HERSHEL enters followed by ZINDEL.

HERSHEL: Greetings, townspeople of Chelm!

KREINDEL: Late as usual. Did you ever see such a lazy man?

ZINDEL: I see the mountains are still in their same place, Father. I thought you said if we came late they would be moved by now?

HERSHEL: Shh. Go towards the back. That way we won't have to push as hard.

ZINDEL and HERSHEL position themselves in the back.

RABBI ZELIG: I declare that we now push.

And with one great movement, all the TOWNSPEOPLE lean against their mountain and push.

HENRIETTA: You have to give them credit, Norm. They're following through.

NORM: I know.

HENRIETTA: Shouldn't you be down there? You are their Guardian Angel, after all.

NORM: "Mistress-Henrietta-who-is-so-bossy-an-angel-could-bust-from-aggravation" – you don't always have to tell me what to do. I'm going . . . I'm going.

NORM moves among the TOWNSPEOPLE. THEY do not see or hear him.

HENRIETTA: Don't just shlump down there, Norm! Have some pride in your mission!

As NORM gets down from his cloud, YOSSEL keels over.

YOSSEL: I ... I ... I ...

YOSSEL falls over in a dead faint. NORM enters and feels for a pulse.

KREINDEL: Yossel! My Yossel is lying on the ground!

SHAYNA: Give him air. All step away!

KREINDEL: Step away? Will no one help?

NORM: (*Whispering to TEVEL.*) Artificial respiration . . . the man needs artificial respiration.

TEVEL: (*TEVEL'S eyes burst open with new inspiration.*) I know! Artificial respiration! (*Of course, he has no idea as to what he said.*) What is artificial respiration?

RABBI ZELIG: Tevel is right. The man needs artificial respiration.

KREINDEL: No!

ALL: No?

KREINDEL: *REAL* respiration or nothing! My Yossel needs the real stuff!

NORM fans YOSSEL and he awakens.

FEIJA: Oh Father! It is a miracle!

NORM: It was nothing.

DEVIRA: You're alive!

NORM: He just got over-heated, really. I did nothing.

KREINDEL: Yossel! What did you do that for? You had us worried. Stand up straight and don't do that again! A person could burst from worry.

YOSSEL: Yes, Kreindel. I'm all right, Kreindel. Aren't you happy I am fine?

KREINDEL: Happy, schmappy. As long as you're healthy. He fainted from the heat. We should remove our jackets so we don't all keel over.

BATKA: Husband, don't you think we need a proclamation?

RABBI ZELIG: Why dear Batka?

BATKA: So, we may all take off our jackets. The order should come from a wise man.

RABBI ZELIG: Of course. I do declare that as the sun is at its highest peak in the sky, we should all remove our jackets.

YACHNA: But Rabbi Zelig - I am not wearing any jacket!

RABBI ZELIG: And furthermore, if you are not wearing a jacket, it should remain on! How was that?

BATKA: Good my Husband. You should be quiet now.

ALL with jackets on should remove them and pile them up by the side.

ZINDEL: I feel like a snooze.

LEBA: Rabbi, is this right? Zindel has done nothing but complain all morning. He barely pushed and now he needs to rest! Well, let him rest! Like a beet he should grow with his head in the earth!

SHAYNA: My sister does not always think before she speaks.

ZINDEL: I don't mind. I think we should all take a nap. That way, when we wake up, we will be so rested that we will push the mountains far apart.

TEVEL: Rabbi? May we rest?

RABBI ZELIG: I proclaim –

And YOSSEL immediately falls asleep.

...I proclaim that we all . . .

And as one, the TOWNSPEOPLE get comfortable on the ground. In unison, there is a loud snore.

Sleep. Very good. Excellent.

He shrugs his shoulders, looks around and settles down to sleep.

NORM: *(Looking around.)* Works for me.

As NORM looks to get settled, two robbers enter: VELVEL and DUBKA. They may even wear the stereotypical robber eye masks, if desired.

Uh oh. Looks like a couple of no-good-niks to me. Better stay awake and guard the people.

VELVEL and DUBKA gingerly tiptoe around the sleeping TOWNSPEOPLE. DUBKA spies the pile of jackets.

DUBKA: Velvel! Over here! Jackets!

VELVEL: You call those jackets, Dubka? Pretty shabby if you ask me.

DUBKA: But they're free. Do you know what I'm thinking?

VELVEL: Make hay when the sun shines and take jackets while the owners sleep!

NORM: Uh oh. I should – do something. Wake up, people of Chelm!

VELVEL: I don't know which I want.

DUBKA: We're not shopping. Just take them all and we can sell what we don't want.

NORM: PEOPLE OF CHELM! WAKE-UP!

RABBI ZELIG: Oh! What's that? What?

VELVEL: Better hide.

DUBKA dives under the jackets and VELVEL simply puts a jacket on his head.

SHAYNA: Why everyone - look at the sun. We are sleeping the afternoon away! We will never move a mountain by sleeping.

RABBI ZELIG: Townspeople of Chelm, please wake up! It has occurred to me that sleeping is not the way to move a mountain.

ALL rise – a bit disgruntled.

CHANI: We will never build a school if we do not make space! Please everyone, back to work.

REINA: I am sure I don't know her. Does anyone know her?

SISEL: Why, she's the school teacher, of course.

REINA: When did we get a school teacher?

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ALL position themselves by the mountains.

HERSHEL: What a life! For this, we were created?

LEBA: Stop your moaning and groaning and push!

And with one swoop of a movement, ALL push. While NORM speaks, the TOWNSPEOPLE slowly alternate with one big push, a sigh, a wipe of their forehead and then continue again with another push, etc.

NORM: I can't watch this silliness! I'm leaving.

HENRIETTA: But Norm – you're not supposed to -

NORM is gone.

- leave them!

As NORM leaves, VELVEL and DUBKA emerge from their hiding place. The TOWNSPEOPLE are intent on pushing the mountain and are looking the other way.

DUBKA: Look at all these people. Are you sure this is wise? You think we can swipe the coats from under their noses?

VELVEL: Wise, schmise! How smart are these people? I mean – for crying out loud Dubka – they're trying to move a mountain!

DUBKA: Point taken. Get the jackets.

And they do so and run off.

LEBA: Wait a minute – I don't see our jackets anymore! They are gone!

SHAYNA: Why, so they are. Isn't that wonderful?

LEBA: You think it is wonderful that our jackets have disappeared?

SHAYNA: Don't you see? We pushed the mountains so far away – we cannot see our jackets anymore!

RABBI ZELIG: It's a miracle!

ALL: Ahhhh!

And the TOWNSPEOPLE face forward and look to the heavens.

RABBI ZELIG: Everyone, let us return to town and see what we can do with our new space.

As the TOWNSPEOPLE exit, NORM returns to HENRIETTA on his "cloud."

HENRIETTA: You're not going to believe this.

NORM: What? What did I miss?

HENRIETTA: Robbers stole their jackets.

NORM: Oh no! I am doomed to perch on a cloud for eternity! How did this terrible thing happen? I woke them up!

HENRIETTA: Yes, you did, so they resumed pushing the mountain. When they noticed their jackets were gone, they were most pleased. They decided they had pushed the mountains so far apart, they couldn't see their jackets anymore. Norm – I think you have your work cut out for you. You are never leaving this cloud!

END OF SCENE

ACT ONE, SCENE 4

The Children Of Chelm

AT RISE: *It is a new morning. The town square is empty, except for CHANI and YACHNA. CHANI is preparing for school.*

YACHNA: Mother, I am not so sure about "the plan."

CHANI: What's not to like? We have a home. I have a job. When your no-good father, may he rest in peace or Warsaw-or-whenever-he-is - left us to see the world, I had to do something.

YACHNA: But Mother – you're not a school teacher.

CHANI: I read. I write. And I can help others to do the same. It's a living. Don't you like Chelm? Isn't it nice at Shayna's and Leba's? All that fresh fish everywhere.

YACHNA: Yes, mother. I love sleeping in a bed that smells like fish. I love that my clothes smell like fish. I love that there are fish heads staring at me everywhere I go.

CHANI: People starve, my Yachna. I give thanks every day for fish.

YACHNA: How long do you think we can get away with this?

CHANI: As long as we can. I am a woman with a child earning my way. If the children of Chelm learn to read and write, I am performing a good service, so what's not to like?

YACHNA: You never did get a school.

CHANI: Yes, but the people think they now have more space in their town and the market place suits me fine.

YACHNA: And when it rains?

CHANI: We stay in and study. Look! The children are starting to come.

And around the theatre we see the MOTHERS sending their CHILDREN off to school.

BATKA: Oh my little Bubelah, please be good for the teacher.

SISEL: Yes, Mama.

BATKA: And Bubelah, don't talk to strangers.

SISEL: Of course, Mama.

BATKA: And eat all of your lunch, my little Bubelah.

SISEL: I will, Mama.

REINA: Drozha, you must listen carefully to your teacher.

DROZHA: I will, Mama.

KREINDEL: Work hard Feija.

FEIJA: Of course, Mother!

KREINDEL: And don't speak unless you are spoken to, Devira.

DEVIRA: I won't, Mother.

REINA and BATKA: My children! Their first day of school!

And all the MOTHERS except for KREINDEL burst into tears and exit. The CHILDREN go to CHANI on the Square.

CHANI: Welcome to the first day of school. Do you all have your slates?

CHILDREN: Yes.

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CHANI: Good. Such wonderful children!

FEIJA: Excuse me, but are we going to learn anything? I didn't think girls went to school.

CHANI: Everyone should go to school.

FEIJA: But we already know how to read and write.

CHANI: You do?

DEVIRA: Yes. Our fancy-schmancy aunt in Warsaw visits us every year for a month and teaches us.

CHANI: Then – what are you doing here?

FEIJA: Mother says we're driving her crazy at home and so we may as well come to school and drive you crazy!

CHANI: Oh. Well, how nice for your mother. She should live to be a hundred and twenty while I die young from aggravation!

HERSEL and ZINDEL appear. HERSHEL smiles broadly at CHANI. HE likes her very much.

HERSHEL: Excuse me, but is this the first day of school?

ZINDEL: I'm NOT going to school.

HERSHEL: My son would like to join the class.

ZINDEL: No, he doesn't.

HERSHEL: Yes he does! He knows nothing.

ZINDEL: I read!

HERSHEL: So, you learn to read better!

HERSHEL stomps off leaving ZINDEL there who is clearly miserable.

CHANI: Okay – to begin again -

ZINDEL: Excuse me, but I have a lot of questions. My father said you would have the answers.

CHANI: He did? Such a nice child! Such wonderful children!

ZINDEL: I need to know why the sky is blue on sunny days. But when it is cloudy out, the sky is gray.

CHANI: Why – because ... that is the way the world was made.

ZINDEL: That is not a proper answer. That's the answer my father gives me. Why should I come here if you give me the same answers I get at home?

SISEL raises her hand.

CHANI: Oh! Sisel. Do you have an answer for that?

SISEL: Sisel? Who's Sisel?

CHANI: Why, you of course. Did you want to answer?

SISEL: No. I just thought it was a good question.

ZINDEL: And I have more questions: Which mountain is the tallest? The one on the right of Chelm or the one on the left? Or are they exactly the same? They look the same.

CHANI: Uh . . .yes. Very good questions from such inquisitive children. Actually, I am not here to answer questions. I . . .uhhh . . .am here to teach *you* to think. So you can answer your own questions. So ask questions. Ask away! And then answer them yourself!

YACHNA: Pretty fancy footwork, Mom.

CHANI: I'm dancing as fast as I can. Now, for instance – let me give you a riddle to ponder. It will wake up your brain. What hangs on a wall, is red, wet and whistles? Anyone have an answer to that one?

SISEL: I have pictures that hang on a wall. Some are red.

FEIJA: But are they wet?

SISEL: Of course not. Everything dries . . .eventually.

DEVIRA: Except a river or a lake.

FEIJA: But you can't hang that on a wall!

ZINDEL: What whistles?

DROZHA: A teakettle.

ZINDEL: You can't hang that on a wall!

DROZHA: You didn't ask that! You asked what whistles!

ZINDEL: I know the answer!

CHANI: Good! What is it?

ZINDEL: The answer is "nothing." There is nothing that hangs on a wall, is red, wet and whistles.

CHANI: Of course there is. Gefilte fish.

ZINDEL: Gefilte fish doesn't hang on a wall!

CHANI: Where is it written that gefilte fish doesn't hang on a wall? Hang it there!

SISEL: But – gefilte fish isn't red!

CHANI: If you paint it red – it will be red!

FEIJA: But – it's not wet. It's out of the water and on a wall!

CHANI: If you just painted the fish red – it would be wet.

DROZHA: But – a gefilte fish doesn't whistle!

CHANI: Oh, that part. I just threw that part in to make it hard.

ZINDEL: For this I was sent to school? For whistling gefilte fish?

CHANI: Now, let's get to work on our slates. We're going to learn to write.

ALL continue working on their slates as NORM watches. HENRIETTA enters. NORM may freeze the school.

HENRIETTA: What's new?

NORM: The children of Chelm are at school.

HENRIETTA: Why Norm! Your pride should be bursting! A school! That's good. The people of Chelm may make it on their own after all. Someday, you may get off this cloud.

NORM: And get my old job back? Do you think there's a chance?

HENRIETTA: What are you thinking, Norm? We're not populating the world with souls anymore. Look around! It's populated!

NORM: So what do you do now, Henrietta?

HENRIETTA: Why, nothing Norm. Absolutely nothing.

NORM: You . . .do . . .NOTHING?!!!!

HENRIETTA: It's a tough little job, Norm, but someone has to do it. Shalom, Norm. I'm off visiting. Watch your town carefully. It could be your ticket to a new eternity.

HENRIETTA exits and NORM brings the CHILDREN back to life.

CHANI: Well, that's it for the day. I'll see you tomorrow.

ZINDEL: Tomorrow? You mean we have to do this *again*?

CHANI: Every day until you are educated. And tomorrow, we will begin preparations for a celebration.

ZINDEL: A celebration? Things are looking up.

CHANI: You may go home.

ALL CHILDREN: We're free!

The CHILDREN go to their MOTHERS. There are hugs all around.



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