

"THE FIRST SCHLEMIHL"

The word "schlemihl" is a Yiddish -- and Anglo-Yiddish -- pejorative term for a special kind of personality, whose characteristics are apparently self-evident. Maurice Samuel has written of him, "It is the schlemihl's avocation and profession to miss out on things, to muff opportunities, to be persistently, organically, preposterously, and ingeniously out of place."

What is the origin of this particular term? It is hard to say. There are a number of theories. The most probable, to my mind, is a passing reference in today's Sidra. In the listing of the heads of the Tribes of Israel we read:

לשמעון שלומיאל בן צורי שדאי "the head of the Tribe of Simeon was Shelumiel the son of Zuri-Shaddai."

In what way was Shelumiel a "schlemihl?" It is quite puzzling, because we really know very little from Scripture about the Biblical Shelumiel. And the name itself -- "God's peace" -- tells us nothing about him.

However, when we turn to the Talmudic-Midrashic tradition, we do find some hints about the personality of Shelumiel that may provide Biblical dimensions for the well-known "schlemihl."

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 28b) records the opinion of R. Yohanan, that Shelumiel had five different names. One of the people with whom this Shelumiel is identified, give us, I believe, a measure of understanding into why Shelumiel had become a model of ridicule and failure, a laughing-stock for generations. And the story itself is very far from a laughing matter.

Shelumiel is identified with זמרי בן סלוא, Zimri the son of Salu, who is later (Nu. 25:14) described as a prince of the tribe of Simeon. The story that is told to us in the Torah, later in this book, is that after the incident with Balaam, the Children of Israel began to be attracted to the daughters of Moab and Midian in the pagan rites of Baal-Peor. These rites were immoral, obscene, and all of this was planned by Balaam who, having failed to curse the Israelites, decided upon this device so that they might bring curse upon themselves. These immoral deeds afflicted the very highest echelons. Zimri himself flaunted his prohibited amorous activity with a Midianite woman in the very eyes of Moses and all Israel. Whereupon Phineas, in his zeal, ran him through with a spear and killed him.

How does this act of brazen immorality make of Shelumiel a "schlemihl?" Heinrich Heine, the great German poet who was an apostate Jew, heard of this Talmudic passage about Shelumiel and

Zimri, and misunderstood it. In his poem, "Jehuda Ben Halevy," he writes:

Phineas, blind with fury,
In the sinner's place,
By ill luck,
Chanced to kill a guiltless person
Named Schlemihl ben Zuri-Shaddai.
He, then, this Schlemihl the First,
Was the ancestor of all the
Race Schlemihls

Not so! Shelumiel or Zimri was not at all guiltless or mistakingly killed by Phineas. Heine assumed that Phineas meant to kill Zimri but, by error, killed Shelumiel. He did not realize that the Talmud identifies both men.

The Yiddish carefully distinguishes between two allied stereotypes: the "schlemihl" and the "schlemazzel." It is the latter, not the former, who is hapless, luckless, a constant victim of conspiring circumstances. The usual example is given of the man who walks along a ledge and inadvertently kicks over a can of paint which falls on the head of a second man. The first one is the "schlemihl," the second the "schlemazzel" -- possibly deriving from the German and Hebrew, Schlim-mazzal, bad luck. Heine is thus describing the "schlemazzel," and calling him a "schlemihl."

What Heine did not know was the whole story as told by the Talmud. There (Sanh. 82a) we read as follows:

The tribe of Simeon came to Zimri b. Salu (i.e., Shelumiel) and they said to him, "They are engaged in determining questions of life and death (i.e., Moses and Aaron are sitting in judgment on those guilty of indulging in immorality with the Midianites and Moabites), and you sit by quietly?" What did Zimri do? He arose and assembled twenty-four thousand Israelites and went to Cozbi the daughter of Zur, and said to her, "Listen to me." She responded, "I am the daughter of a king (i.e., the King of Midian), and my father told me never to obey anyone but the top man." Said he to her, "I too am

a leader, for I am the prince of a tribe; moreover, I am greater than he (Moses), for I am the second born in my family, whereas he is the third born." Thereupon he grabbed her by her hair and brought her to Moses. Zimri said to Moses, "Son of Amram, is this one permitted to me or forbidden to me? And if you will say she is forbidden to me, who permitted you to marry the daughter of Jethro?" (The obvious answer, to which Zimri or Shelumiel was oblivious, was that Moses had married Zipporah, the daughter of the Midianite Jethro, before the Torah was given and intermarriage was prohibited.)

This is the background of Zimri, who was at that point killed by Phineas.

Think of this story, analyze it well, and you will know why Zimri is called a Shelumiel, and why Shlumiel was indeed a "schlemihl!"

Note, at first, certain positive elements. Shelumiel was not at all a hapless, unlucky goat. He was not a "sclemazzel." He certainly had leadership quality -- he was, after all, a נָשִׂיא, a prince of a tribe. He clearly had courage: he was willing to defy Moses himself. And, in a twisted kind of way, he possessed what might be called integrity. But when we think a bit more deeply of what he did, we will know why he was truly a "schlemihl."

For one thing, when the Rabbis tell us that he had five different names, they are already giving us a hint about his character structure. He was obviously a man of uncertain and unstructured identity, one who does not know what he wants or who he is -- or who he wants to be. He flits in and out of roles in a very tricky manner, and we are never certain who he really is. So, anyone can be a "schlemihl." But a "schlemihl" is -- no one, because he can be so many people! As a result, he keeps on trying out new roles, until he strikes the wrong one, gets himself into hot water, goes beyond his depths, runs afoul of the law -- and is executed.

Second, Shelumiel suffers from an inflated ego, and so he lets himself be flattered. "Shelumiel, you are a prince

amongst men!" he is told by his fawning aides. And so, like a true "schlemihl," he tells himself that he is the equal of any man. He is goaded into challenging Moses. He is so flattered by the attention he receives, by the appurtenances of his office, that he goes along with their nefarious plans. He forgets his limitations. When Cozbi pulls him down a rung or two, which should have shocked him into reality, he claims superiority to Moses on the most ludicrous grounds -- that he is second-born whereas Moses is only third-born!

Third, once he gets himself this new identity as a Very Important Person, he can be easily manipulated by sinister forces who remain behind the scenes. He has grandiose conceptions of himself. Yet he is a tool, a pawn, a marionette, who is goaded into abandoning every shred of decency and morality, and all the while fancies himself a great leader, even an honorable one.

Fourth, he resorts to force and lawlessness when persuasion and justice fail. When Cozbi speaks out and up to him, he grabs her by her hair and pulls her along. Nothing will stand in his way. The brute, the animal, the cave-man in him comes out when his human dignity fails him.

Fifth, Shelumiel is willing to engage in the most devious distortions of the law in order to prove his point, even when he knows he is wrong. He thinks he can fool everyone and anyone, even Moses, whom he now considers the "enemy."

So we have here, in this story, the characteristics of the first "schlemihl." Maybe he is not completely identical with what we today mean by this pejorative term, but it is close enough. And we discover that the "schlemihl" is not unintelligent but, what is worse, he is unwise; he is not inept as much as he is sinister.

Consider why this נ'שׁוּב (which, of course, means "prince," not "president") is a "schlemihl," despite his talents and courage and guts.

He is not sure of his own identity and is therefore willing to play many roles, ultimately confusing himself with his own office, as if the נ'שׁוּב is identical with the מֶלֶךְ נ'שׁוּב ... like another head of state over three thousand years later, the leader of a very powerful country who identified his person with his position. I am thinking, of course, of -- the king of France, who said, "l'état c'est moi."

Shelumiel was so egotistical that he allowed his underlings

to isolate him, to flatter him and elevate him beyond his own limitations, to make him think that he is much more powerful than he really is, completely independent of others. He allows them to nurture within him the illusion of omnipotence.

Third, as a result, the "schlemihl" can be manipulated by his own subordinates and pushed into genuinely immoral conduct by small men. All the while, his self-awareness as a Great Man continues unabated -- so much so, that he is willing to expose his immorality in public, letting the whole world gaze in amazement at his greed and cupidity and ugliness, and he thinks that no one will fault him for it.

Fourth, when all lawful means and ways of persuasion fail, he resorts to brute force, to arbitrariness, to force majeure. He will let no one and nothing stand in his way, for he comes first. He will "stonewall" his way to survival.

Fifth, the "schlemihl" is one who then looks upon the law as something which he can twist and turn and push and pull at will, to make it conform to his own lack of probity and decency. He calls upon the very law that he violates in order to defend himself. He recognizes no authority other than himself on the law, not even Moses, who now heads his "enemies list."

Such is the Biblical Shelumiel. All other "schlemihls" share one or another of his traits. It is rare indeed to find a "schlemihl" who, like the $\aleph \omega$ of the tribe of Simeon, is in a position of power and evinces all the same characteristics. But it can happen, it can happen. And when it does, it is a cause for grief for an entire people. For so we read, that all the Children of Israel were weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, the center of power and authority in ancient Israel. The Biblical "schlemihl" was a man of unimpeachable "schlemihood," and he was disposed of in an act of zealousness. What could have been an unmitigated disaster was narrowly averted.

Unfortunately, however, while the great disaster was averted, the calamity that struck anyway was great enough. It has to, when a "schlemihl" rises to power -- or, as happened, when one in power becomes a "schlemihl." Twenty four thousand corpses in ancient Israel were testimony to his tragic foolishness.

So there is a great moral in the story of the first "schlemihl." And it is not at all a laughing matter.

In thinking of the Biblical Shūmīel, I am filled with a sense of pity mingled with contempt. Yet, I have greater pity for the people on whom he was foisted and who suffered so on his account.

In a word, I pity the "schlemazzel" more than the "schlemihl."