

A Dispute in Sign Language

Adapted by Mistress Dervila ni Leonon

Based on Favorite Folktales from Around the World, pg. 42

Jewish

Time: About 3:55

Once there was a wicked priest who hated all Jews. He wanted to kill them all. Finally *[pause]* he came up with a plan. He called the rabbi before him and said

“I wish to have a dispute in sign language with a Jew. You have thirty days to find someone who will understand me and reply correctly, or I will kill you all.”

The rabbi went back and told his people of the wicked priest’s demand. All of them thought day and night of how to understand the priest’s signs and answer them, but no one could do it. One week, two weeks, three weeks passed. All the Jews were crying and fasting and praying to God for help. Then a chicken farmer who had been away all that month came home to find his family in a dreadful state.

“What is wrong, wife? Why are you and the children crying and fasting and praying?”

[crying] “Oh, husband, that wicked priest is going to kill us all unless one of us can hold a dispute with him in sign language. We only have a week left, and even the rabbi does not know what to do!”

“What, a simple argument in sign language? I will do it!”

And so the chicken farmer met with the wicked priest for the dispute.

The priest held up one finger. The chicken farmer held up two. Then the priest brought out a piece of cheese. The farmer responded by pulling out an egg. Finally the priest scattered grain all over the floor. The farmer put a hen on the floor, and the hen ate all the grain.

[astonished] “Amazing!”, said the priest, “You understood me! Truly the Jews must be a wise people if even the humblest can dispute so.” And he gave the farmer many gifts, and repented of his wicked hatred.

The chicken farmer went home and told everyone that they were saved.

“But what did he do? And how did you answer him?”

“First, he held up one finger, meaning he would put out one of my eyes. So I held up two fingers, meaning I would put out both his eyes. Then he took out some cheese, showing that he had food while I did not. I pulled out an egg to show that I did not need his charity. Then he scattered grain on the floor, so I let a hen loose. She was hungry and she ate all the grain. And now he says he will no longer persecute us.”

And the Jews cheered, *[throw arms up]* “Hurray!”

But the rest of the town went to the priest.

“What did you ask him? And how did he answer?”

“First I held up one finger, meaning there was one King. He held up two, meaning there were two kings, one in heaven and the other on earth. Next I showed him some cheese, asking if it was from a white goat or from a brown goat. He took out an egg, asking if it was from a white hen or from a brown hen. Then I scattered grain on the floor, to show that the Jews were scattered all

over the earth. He let loose a hen which ate all the grain, to show that the Messiah will gather all the Jews together. Truly they are a wise people!”

Full bibliography of source:

*Yolen, Jane, editor. Favorite Folktales from Around the World. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986.
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