

The Brother's Schlemiel Serial Continues!

by Jon Rubin
Assistant Editor

Actually, that's the point of a serial novel — it continues because it hasn't been finished yet. Mark Binder spoke about his serial novel *The Brother's Schlemiel* at last Tuesday's Brown Bag Club meeting at the Jewish Community Center. Released chapter by chapter by Binder via e-mail, subscribers receive each chapter in incremented installments. Why release them in serial format, he was asked. "I am very impatient," he joked. "I am in the midst of a novel." Usually when you hear about a book, it's already done and has been finished for up to two years. You can't buy *The Brother's Schlemiel* because it's not finished yet. You can, however, receive the completed parts on a weekly basis, which is sort of like riding a speeding roller-coaster that nobody, not even the architect, knows where it's going to turn next. Every installment leaves you with another cliffhanger, and you are kept in suspense on the receiving end. *The Brother's Schlemiel* is being serialized in the *Jewish Herald* in Houston, Texas, on a weekly basis.

Binder is a novelist, short-story writer, storyteller and freelance writer who lives in Providence. More than 150 of his short stories have been published, including more than 30 Chelm stories in Jewish magazines and newspapers all across the United States. Binder is the author of many children's novels and short stories, including *The Everything Bedtime Storybook*, and his humorous anti-diet book *Crumbs Don't Count — The Rationalization Book*.

The Brother's Schlemiel is a serialized novel about the infamous city of Chelm. For those who don't know, Chelm is a fictional village filled with somewhat "wise women and men" who are considered by most people to be, as Binder puts it, "complete dunderheads." Although Chelm stories have been written by authors as famous as Sholem Alechem and I.B. Singer, they all carried a similar vein of weakness owing to the two-dimensional, disposable nature of their characters. Binder solves this by populating his Chelm with funny, believable people, who, while still a bit dim, are not just cartoonish caricatures. The story centers around two brothers, Adam and Abraham, identical twins born 12 hours apart who were immediately confused by their parents at birth. Whimsical, biting and totally engrossing, *The Brother's Schlemiel* is as comfortable as a good spot next to a roaring fire.

Each chapter released has "catch up" information that allows a reader to jump in at any time. Some stories are "stand alone," but they all help to build the Chelm that Binder creates. Although the entire novel is available online, the first section of the novel, *Part One — From Birth to Bar Mitzvah*, is available on CD and is read by Binder himself. Binder's speaking voice, both in person and on the CD, is rich and lively and infused with humor. The CD covers the misadventures in the first 13 years of their lives. Binder is happy that his novel has outlasted Steven King's short-lived serial novel "The Plant," which failed to captivate his target audience.

At his JCC appearance, Binder read three excerpts from stories: "The Bris," "The Man who complained himself to death," and "A Present? For Hanukkah?" The first story was about the new-born boys and their father's odd request to the mohel to make their brides "different" so the parents could tell them apart. The rabbi looked incredulously at the father and asked, "When they get in trouble, you want them to drop their pants?" While it is true that nobody can tell the two boys

a robber who they helped capture. The train breaks down, and the boys, along with their traveling companion Rabbi Kibbitz, have to mush through the rain on foot. Rabbi Kibbitz's legendary complaining is perfect in its Jewishness, and his exaggerations and kvetchings are all spot on. "Complaining is one of the great joys of life!" Rabbi Kibbitz tell the boys. When he and the boys are later sitting in a water-logged, lopsided tent in the middle of a gale, the rabbi begins to tell a



MARK BINDER talks about his new serial novel *The Brother's Schlemiel* at the JCC.
Herald photo by Jon Rubin

apart, is the rabbi actually going to go against Jewish tradition to help out a father in need? What is he going to do?

The second story is about Adam and Abraham's trek to another village by train, where they must testify in court about

tale of a complainer far worse than himself, and the gruesome and humorous fate that befalls him.

The third story contained a very funny story of the origin of Chanukah gift giving in Chelm. I don't want to reveal any more about Binder's novel than I have to, but let's just say that it has to do with Christmas,

poems and a little bit of childhood envy.

Binder spoke about the difficulties in getting his book published. He said that most publishers are overly cautious and only want to bet on previously published and recognized authors like King and Tom Clancy. He described the literal chaos in the world of publishing, where "nobody knows what they are doing" and remarked that there is a huge absence of knowledge when it comes to online publishing. As good as his stories are, online stories "don't sell themselves," Binder said. Binder is extremely confident about his book and is working hard to promote it without any sort of major advertising firm backing him. He estimates he will be finished with the whole story by 2002.

The Providence Phoenix says that *The Brother's Schlemiel* contains, "Wired words... electric prose." Rhode Island's official Web site, <www.OSO.com>, remarks that, "The return of serialized literature is long overdue and *The Brother's Schlemiel* seems the perfect work to introduce a new generation of readers to a method as traditional as Dickens using technology that Jules Verne could only have dreamed of." The stories can be enjoyed by people of any age, from children to grandparents.

Binder's CD installment, *Part One — From Birth to Bar Mitzvah*, costs \$24.95 and includes more than an hour's worth of stories as well as the entire novel by e-mail subscription. E-mail-only subscriptions are \$19.95 and this one-time fee pays for the entire novel as well. Copies are available for sale at the JCC Bookfair until Dec. 27 and make excellent gifts, or you may purchase the story online at <www.chelmtales.com>.