

# OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

On April 25th-26th, 1986, the World's worst nuclear power accident occurred at Chernobyl in the former USSR (now Ukraine). The Chernobyl nuclear power plant, located 80 miles north of Kiev, had four reactors. While testing Reactor 4, numerous safety procedures were disregarded. At 1:23 am the chain reaction in the reactor went out of control, creating explosions and a fireball which blew off the reactor's heavy steel and concrete lid. The Chernobyl accident killed more than 30 people immediately, and as a result of the high radiation levels in the surrounding 20-mile radius, 135,000 people had to be evacuated.

This is Chernobyl's latter-day claim-to-fame. Before 1986, it was known as the city which produced the famed tzaddik Reb Nachum of Chernobyl zt"l, disciple of the holy Ba'al Shem Tov. To this very day, gentile residents of Chernobyl still acknowledge the greatness and holy powers of R' Nachum, despite the more than 250 years that have passed since his holy presence graced the small town.

While the Torah contains 613 mitzvos, each of which we are commanded to keep to the best of our ability, this does not preclude the concept of "specialization." Indeed, many great tzaddikim had certain special mitzvos which received the lion's share of their attention, even though they were most scrupulous in their observance of all mitzvos. For R' Nachum zt"l, his "specialty" was the mitzvah of Pidyon Shvuyim - redemption of captives.

In those days, Jewish merchants would lease property from the wealthy European land-owners whose presence dominated the countryside. While some land-owners were fine individuals, the vast majority were cruel, greedy tyrants who extorted exorbitant fees for sub-par properties. A Jew looking to earn a living had little choice - either pay up, or lose his business. And G-d forbid were a Jew to go delinquent on his lease payments. Even if late for legitimate reasons, he would be given warning, after which he would be evicted from his property, and thrown into a jail, pit, or dungeon. Many Jews died in such quarters after extended periods in captivity.

R' Nachum made it his business to ensure that no Jew remain in captivity for lack of sufficient funds. He would travel from village to village, enquiring into the wellbeing of the locals. When R' Nachum would hear that a Jew had been taken captive, he would not rest until he had raised enough money to pay off his debts, and secure his immediate release. R' Nachum left no stone unturned in his quest to free all captives.

Once, while travelling in the Ukrainian village of Zhitomar, some people took a distinct disliking to R'

Nachum for no reason other than that in their corruptness, they felt threatened and intimidated by his holiness and pious ways. They spread rumours that R' Nachum was cheating the government, and made sure their false accusations were heard in the right places. R' Nachum was arrested, and for many weeks lived in captivity while awaiting his trial (he was ultimately acquitted).

While in general R' Nachum practised the ideal of his namesake R' Nachum Ish Gamzu (who would say "Gam zu le-tova - This too is for my good!" no matter what happened - see Ta'anis 25a), he found his present circumstances beyond comprehension. How could it be that he - who had dedicated the better part of his life to freeing others from captivity and imprisonment - should be taken prisoner? What could he possibly have done to deserve such a fate? Was this perhaps a sign from Heaven that his deeds were unworthy, that he had failed to perform the mitzvah of Pidyon Shvuyim 'for its own sake?' These questions plagued R' Nachum and gave his wearied mind no peace.

One day, a contemporary received permission to visit R' Nachum in prison. He found R' Nachum in very low spirits. "Let me ask you something, R' Nachum," said his visitor. "Who was the greatest Machnis Orchim (host to the wayfarer) that ever lived?"

"Why Avraham Avinu," said R' Nachum. "Chazal, our holy Sages, say that Avraham's tent had four openings, one in each direction, so that a weary traveller would never need to go looking for the entrance, but rather could enter immediately, and be treated to the warm food and hospitality of Avraham and Sarah."

"Yet," said the visitor, "we find that Hashem tested Avraham by telling him (Bereishis 12:1), 'Lech-lecha - journey abroad; leave your land, and your birthplace, and live the uncomfortable life of a wanderer.' Furthermore, when Avraham came to Canaan, by the command of Hashem, he encountered a great famine, so much so that he was forced to leave Canaan and go to Egypt. There, instead of having his hospitality returned to him, Sarah was taken from him.

"Now why, of all things, did Hashem choose to test Avraham by making him journey from his home and live the life of a wanderer? Is it just that a person who had dedicated his life to helping the wayfarer should himself be subjected to such harsh conditions?

"I see it like this: Avraham Avinu was truly a great Machnis Orach. Yet as great as he was, there's always room for improvement. Avraham never really appreciated just how great the mitzvah of taking in a guest is, because he had never himself experienced what it feels like to traverse a scorching desert by daytime, not knowing if he would even have a comfortable bed in which to sleep for the night. This was the one ingredient still missing from Avraham's Hachnasas Orchim - a true appreciation for what the mitzvah means to its recipient.

"Therefore Hashem told Avraham, 'Lech lecha - go out, and taste the searing desert dust upon your lips. Only through such an exercise will you ever appreciate the mitzvah to which you have shown such dedication.

"You too, R' Nachum. All your life you have demonstrated such commitment to the mitzvah of Pidyon Shvuyim. Yet it is only now, after having lived in captivity yourself, that you can truly understand just how great the mitzvah you're doing really is. I have no doubt that this is why Hashem has placed you in such a predicament. Soon you will be released, so that you can continue doing what you've been doing all your life, only with even greater fervour and dedication."

His words made an impression on R' Nachum. From that point on, until his ultimate release, R' Nachum focused on living the life of the imprisoned, and knowing how it felt.

"A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty. (Sir Winston Churchill)" Or, as Sir Oliver Cromwell put it, "One makes the iron hot by striking it!" We must be ready to recognize that sometimes from life's most difficult situations arise the greatest opportunities for growth and self-improvement. Every time you experience a difficult or uncomfortable situation, grasp it as an opportunity to identify and empathise with others who may find themselves in similar circumstances. Take note of how you feel and what your needs were (and how good it felt if someone cared for them), and try to re-enact those feelings when, sometime down the road, you have the opportunity to help someone else in a similar situation. Have a good Shabbos.

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