

# WHEN THINGS DON'T GO AS PLANNED

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

After receiving a message that his brother-in-law, Lot, was in trouble in Sodom, Avraham (Avram) arms himself and sets out to rescue him. In the end, he succeeds not only in rescuing Lot, but also in defeating the four kings who had been terrorizing the region. The King of Sodom, in appreciation of Avraham's aid, suggests that Avraham keep the spoils of the war, returning only the people that had been captured. Avraham agrees to return the captives, but refuses to take any spoils.

*Avram said to the king of Sodom, "I lift up my hand to Hashem, G-d, the most High, Maker of heaven and earth, if I take so much as a shoelace - or anything that is yours! That you may never say, 'I made Avram rich.'" [14:21-23]*

What prompted Avram to refuse the king of Sodom's offer? Why was he concerned that the king might claim to have made him rich? And even if he did, so what?

Rav Sholom Schechter, an elderly rabbi, was on a flight to Eretz Yisrael with a stopover in Athens where he would board a connecting flight. It was two days before Rosh Hashanah, and his past few days in New York had been exhausting. Fund-raising, selling sefarim, packing, and preparing for his trip home had all taken their toll on his seventy-year-old body. Exhausted, he fell into a deep sleep as the plane traversed the Atlantic.

He had asked someone to wake him when the plane landed in Athens, but evidently his request was forgotten. Seemingly, it didn't strike anyone as unusual that the rabbi with the long beard remained asleep even as the plane landed in Athens and people disembarked. He remained asleep throughout the stopover and awoke only as the plane roared down the runway, taking off to its next destination.

The captain greeted everyone and detailed the flight plan. Their next stop was Lebanon!

Rabbi Schechter blinked his eyes a few times in disbelief. Lebanon? What happened to Athens? He realized he had slept through Athens, and unlike a bus, he couldn't just get off. His baggage was probably on its way to Eretz Yisrael, but he most certainly was not.

This obviously Jewish man would be in danger in Lebanon. He discussed his predicament with the flight attendant, who discussed it with the captain. They suggested that he stay aboard the plane in Lebanon, and disembark at their next destination - India!

Rabbi Schechter knew that there were Jewish communities in Bombay and Calcutta, but en-route

the captain informed the passengers that due to civil disturbances in India, only those people holding Indian passports would be permitted to disembark.

Rosh Hashanah was only a day off. Checking plane flights and schedules, Rabbi Schechter realized that he had no chance of getting back to Eretz Yisrael on time for Yom Tov. He couldn't help but wonder where in the world this incredible journey might take him. He would have to get off at the next stop after India, wherever it may be. He soon found out - Bangkok, Thailand.

By the time the plane taxied to a stop at Don Muang airport and Rabbi Schechter was cleared through customs, it was only a few hours before Rosh Hashanah. After some desperate inquiries, he was told that there was indeed a synagogue in the centre of town. He made his way there, hoping that someone would be kind enough to invite him home. The people turned out to be more than kind.

He had no trouble conversing with the congregants, for most of the men who attended the synagogue spoke English. He was invited by the president of the synagogue, Mr. Atlas, to be a guest in his home, and it was there that Rabbi Schechter stayed for the next few days.

At the Atlas' table, Rabbi Schechter ate only some cake, fruit, and vegetables that his daughter had packed for his trip, and matzah, which his host provided. He was introduced to Mr. Atlas' children, two of whom were brilliant young scholars studying at Oxford University in England.

When he came to the synagogue the next morning, a surprise was waiting for him: Not only was there no mechitzah (barrier) separating the men from the women, but the congregants were all sitting together. Rabbi Schechter decided to pray alone in a side room, where he could still hear the prayers of the congregation. After shacharis, he asked the rabbi if he could address the congregation.

"My dear Jewish brothers and sisters," he began, "I am grateful to Hashem Who has granted me the privilege of being with you this Rosh Hashanah. Many of you probably know that my original intention was to be in Eretz Yisrael with my family, but G-d in His wisdom decided that I be here with you in Bangkok. I deeply appreciate your hospitality and friendliness, and I feel I owe you an explanation of why I did not pray together with you this morning.

"Every Jewish synagogue is a micro-model of the Beis Ha-mikdash, the Holy Temple that stood in Jerusalem. Its sanctity is to some degree comparable to the sanctity of that most holy site. In order to ensure that there be no frivolity or diversion of attention from the sanctity of the Temple, the Rabbis decreed that men and women should not mingle there. Similarly, a synagogue in which men and women sit together loses some of its sanctity. With all due respect, this is why I did not join you."

Rabbi Schechter's words were eloquent, and moving, yet respectful. He did not talk down to them nor criticize them. Afterwards, he encouraged them to create Torah-study groups so that they could become more knowledgeable about the traditions and customs of their forefathers.

When he finished speaking, an unbelievable thing happened: A Dr. Frankel, one of the members, walked up to the front and began speaking spontaneously. "I'm sure many of you feel, as I do, that it is an honour to have such a distinguished guest in our presence. In deference to Rabbi Schechter, may I suggest that we separate before we continue with the Torah reading and shofar blowing, so that he can pray with us."

In an instant, two hundred people were on the move. The men stationed themselves on the right side of the synagogue, and the women went to the left. And so they remained for the entire holiday.

The next morning, Rabbi Schechter was asked to speak again. The Atlas boys were present. The older of the two, Morris, possessed an inquisitive mind, and was taken with Rabbi Schechter's speech. They had subsequent discussions, and a strong bond between the two.

Morris had never been to a yeshivah, and had little idea what Judaism was about. Yet here was an Orthodox man who touched his heart. By the time Rosh Hashanah was over, Morris had made a decision. He was going to interrupt his studies at Oxford and transfer to Ohr Somayach (a yeshivah with a program for men with minimal Torah background) in Jerusalem. After much negotiation, Mr. Atlas agreed that his son could try it for one semester. The young scholar went off to Israel, and the one semester ended up lasting for three fruitful years. During those years he became a true ben-Torah, and was the catalyst for his younger brother to come to study in Ohr Somayach as well.

Today, the Atlas brothers are Orthodox Jews living in London, strongly committed to Torah and mitzvos, and deeply indebted to the rabbi who slept through his stopover in Athens. Back in Bangkok, the classes which Rabbi Schechter organized also bore fruit; some women are now observing family purity laws for the first time in their lives. (The Maggid Speaks, p. 233)

Avraham, although obviously of great physical strength and skill, was not the type of man to wage wars. Yet here Hashem had guided to defeat the four terrorist kings. Surely there must be some opportunity for Kiddush Hashem (sanctifying Hashem's name), towards which Hashem had set him up so perfectly. He decided not to accept the wealth offered him, so that everyone who had witnessed his great victory would realize that it is not the hands of man that bring success and failure, but Hashem's assistance. "And let no one say that I have made Avram rich," for it is Hashem who runs the world, not us.

This was truly a great Kiddush Hashem, and a wonderful idea of how to take advantage of the unusual situation in which Avraham had been placed. In fact, however, he erred. Chazal (Nedarim 32a) say that he missed out on an even greater opportunity - he should have kept the captives with him; by returning them, he prevented them from being taught the way of G-d.

Life doesn't always go as planned. We often find ourselves in places and with people that we never intended. Instead of focusing on how wrong things have gone, we might better use our resources to try and figure out why Hashem put us there, and what hidden opportunities for Kiddush Hashem and kovod ha-Torah may lie in waiting.

*Have a good Shabbos.*

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