

The Ochberg Orphans

When one man took responsibility, hundreds of lives were saved.

Taking Responsibility

The year 1920 was a very difficult year for the Jews of Russia and other Eastern European countries. It was only a few years after the First World War in which millions of people were killed, and was also the year of the Communist revolt, which triggered battles between two opposing groups in Russia, the Reds and the Whites.

The Reds, of course, were the Communists, and the Whites were the nationalistic forces who fought against the Communists. And the demographic that suffered the most from all this fighting, more than anyone else, was the Jewish population. Both the Reds and the Whites attacked, looted and killed whenever they came upon a Jewish village. On top of that, there were dread diseases like typhus spreading everywhere, causing widespread illness and death.

Estimates from those days talk about 300,000 Jewish orphans in Eastern Europe.

Now in those days, a successful Jewish community took root and grew in Cape Town, South Africa. They even built an orphanage. It was headed by a Jew named Isaac Ochberg. Mr. Ochberg himself had emigrated from Eastern Europe with nothing at the end of the 1800s, but by the year 1920 was one of the richest

men in all of South Africa.

At an orphanage leadership meeting at the start of Year 1921, Isaac Ochberg talked about the news coming from Eastern Europe and the dire situation there. He said that the Jewish community of South Africa needed to do something for those orphans.

Mr. Ochberg suggested that they bring over Eastern European Jewish orphans to South Africa in the hope that the Jewish community adopts these children, and everyone agreed that this was the right thing to do.

So Isaac Ochberg turned to the president of South Africa, and the president agreed to provide visas for 200 orphaned children. Additionally, the South African government obligated itself to donate the same amount that the South African Jewish community would donate—as we call it today, matching funds.

So the South African Jewish community established a special fund whose goal was to raise 10,000 pounds for these children—a sum equivalent to several million dollars today.

But the South African government also established conditions on which children could be brought over:

1. They had to be children bereft of both father and mother (if one parent was still alive, they couldn't be on the list)
2. They needed to be under age 16
3. They had to be physically and psychologically healthy (they forbade bringing over sick children)

4. No family could be broken up—if there were two orphaned brothers and one of them didn't qualify for the list for whatever reason, then his brother wouldn't either qualify)

And an additional condition was that responsibility for these 200 orphans was entirely and exclusively that of the Jewish community of South Africa, not its government.

At one of the orphanage's board meetings, Isaac Ochberg asked which members were prepared to travel to Europe to bring over the kids. And they all said that he was the man most suited for the task. So Mr. Ochberg said that if no one else would be going, he would do it himself.

And so, in March of 1921, Isaac Ochberg traveled to Europe.

First he traveled to London, where he obtained entry visas to all the Eastern European countries that he'd be visiting, along with preparing everything else that he'd need for such a large-scale project.

By July of that year, Isaac Ochberg arrived in Warsaw, Poland. There he opened a field office and began collecting orphans. He also traveled to neighboring countries, like Ukraine, Russia and Galicia (not really a country but the southern region of Poland), where he visited synagogues where orphans had gravitated. The hardest thing for him to do was to choose which orphans to take and which to leave.

Ochberg's list was finally complete, and he loaded them onto cattle trucks and transported them to Warsaw, where he settled them down in a temporary orphanage that he had opened

there. By August, he had succeeded in gathering over 220 children.

But then, wild rumors began spreading among the children: lions and tigers ran wild in the streets of South Africa! Some also claimed that he was really going to sell them into slavery! They also said that there were a lot of diseases in South Africa.

Thirty seven orphans that he had collected ran away from the orphanage, and he was finally left with 183 children.

As it turned out, Isaac Ochberg didn't honor even one of the South African government's conditions. For example, one girl who was over 16 was dubbed a "nurse" who was brought along to help with the voyage. He took a child whose mother was still alive. He separated siblings.

And so, at the end of August, the entire contingent left Warsaw and traveled to London. Only one mother came to the train station to see off her son. The rest had no parents, and no one came to see them off. In London, however, they became instant celebrities, with all the papers publishing stories on the "Russian orphans" who had arrived.

One of the children later related that when they were brought into their dining room in London for the first time and given bread, they fell all over the bread because they never in their lives had previously seen bread. They had had potatoes—but bread? For them, it was the first time.

After three weeks in London, they boarded a ship that brought them to Cape Town, South Africa. The Jewish community of

Cape Town threw a large and beautiful reception for them, and the kids were received with great joy.

Half of those kids stayed on at the Cape Town orphanage, and the other half were transferred to the orphanage in Johannesburg. As it turned out, the majority of the kids didn't get adopted by families and stayed on in the orphanages.

One boy related that when a young couple came to visit the orphanage, he ran over to the young woman, took her hand and called out, "Mama! Mama!" But the woman said, "Go eat your dinner!" He replied, "You're running away from me!" And he didn't leave her until she took pity on him and took him home to adopt him.

As for the rest of them, however, they were virtually adopted by Isaac Ochberg himself. He showered them with endless love, and they returned that love to him. They called him "Daddy Ochberg." When he would visit the orphanage, it would take him a good few hours to get from the ground floor to the third floor because they all would jump on him. One would grab a finger, another would pull at his coat, and they simply wouldn't let him walk forward.

The following year, in 1922, Ochberg once again traveled to Eastern Europe to bring back more kids. However, in the interim, the political situation had changed, and he could no longer get kids out of those countries.

Today, all around the world, there are about 3,000 living descendants of those 183 orphans. And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

Grab the Opportunity

In this week's Parshah, we learn about Avraham Avinu—and this care that Jews have for orphans on the opposite end of the world comes directly from the kindness and compassion of Avraham Avinu.

But I think that there is another lesson here.

When G-d said to Avraham, "*Lech L'cha... el hamakom asher areka,*" Avraham didn't convene a meeting to consider the issue. He didn't put together a focus group. He didn't check the weather, or whether it was the right time of the year to travel, and then check his schedule to see when he'd be able to fit in "Carrying Out G-d's Mission." Rather, the greatness of Avraham Avinu, our Patriarch Avraham, lay in the fact that he immediately got up and did what G-d commanded him.

At the end of this week's Parshah, we read how G-d commands Avraham to perform a bris milah, a circumcision. You have to remember that until that point in history, no one had ever done a circumcision. It was an entirely new "idea." A normal person would have gone to his doctor to ask him for his opinion on the idea. He would then check if he had health insurance in case something went wrong—and even then, he'd set a date to do it for two weeks from now.

In the Torah, however, we read that "In the midst of this day, Avraham and his son Yishmael were circumcised" (Bereishis 17:26). And Rashi adds in Verse 23, "On the very day he was commanded"—the same day on which G-d had commanded him to do it, he immediately did it.

And then we get to the story of the Akeidah, the Binding of Isaac, where we also see Avraham's primary quality: "And Avraham rose in the morning." And as the Rebbe always quoted from the letters of the Alter Rebbe (Igros Kodesh 21), "The haste of Avraham Avinu is what stands forever for us and our children, for all time."

We see this well in the story of Isaac Ochberg. He had gone back to Europe the following year but did not succeed in bringing over more kids. But if he had postponed that first trip by even just a few months, it's likely that his entire plan would not have materialized.

The lesson here, my friends, is that when you have the opportunity, the chance, to do a mitzvah, don't push it off for tomorrow—because it's likely that the window of opportunity now open might close in another short hour and you'll never again be able to do it again. As our Sages said, "Don't let a mitzvah at hand ferment."