

Then Yaakov took a vow, saying if G-d will be with me... Then this stone which I set as a pillar shall become a house of G-d, and whatever You will give me, I shall surely tithe it to You. (28:20,22)

In *Hilchos Arachin* (6:32,33), the *Rambam* writes: “It appears to me that whereas one cannot consecrate something which has not yet appeared in the world (is not yet in existence); if he were, however, to state, ‘I take it upon myself to consecrate this object’ (which is not yet in existence), he must carry out his vow and consecrate the object when it appears in the world. For instance, if one were to say, ‘I will give the fruits of this field (which are not yet here) to poor people, he must give those fruits to the poor when they are available. We derive this *halachah* from Yaakov *Avinu*, who made a vow to tithe whatever Hashem would one day give him. The Torah considers this a *neder*, vow. The *Ravaad* concurs with the proof.

Why did Yaakov make a vow concerning what he would give when it materialized? Why did he not simply wait until that moment that it would be here, and then consecrate it? The idea of taking a vow to do something if and when it will be possible seems unusual.

Horav Arye Leib Bakst, zl, cites the *Talmud Chullin* 71b, where *Chazal* quote the *pasuk* at the beginning of our *parsha*, “And Yaakov departed from Beer-Sheva and went to Charan. He encountered the place” (ibid 28:10,11). The two *pesukim* seem to contradict one another. First, the Torah writes that Yaakov went all the way to Charan, which is quite beyond the borders of *Eretz Yisrael*. Then the Torah writes that “he encountered the place.” This is the place in which the Patriarch had his visions of the Angels ascending and descending the ladder. This place was subsequently named Bais Keil (Beth-El). If Yaakov had already reached Charan, how could he be back in Beth-El? *Chazal* explain that Yaakov did actually reach Charan, but, once he had arrived, he said to himself, “How could I have passed the place where my fathers prayed and not have prayed there myself?” He set his mind to return, and, as soon as he set his mind to return, the ground between Charan and Beth-El miraculously contracted, and lo and behold – *va'yifga ba'makom*, “he encountered the place.”

Chazal's words were: *Kad yahiv daatei l'mihadar*, “When he set his mind to return.” When he personally, on his own, was aroused to return, he merited the miracle of *kefitzas ha'derech*, the earth contracting beneath him. This idea is ratified by *Rashi*, who wonders why, when Yaakov had originally passed Beth-El, Hashem did not halt him there. The answer is: *Ihu lo yahiv libei*, “If he did not set his heart to pray, should they halt him from Heaven?” What a powerful lesson the Torah is teaching us here. We must make the move – then Hashem will do the rest. If we do not have the inspiration on our own, however, if we are not self-motivated, Hashem will not motivate us. It must commence “down here,” and it will be completed from “up there.”

It was during this famous “encounter” that Yaakov had the awesome vision during which Hashem promised him that his descendants would multiply and be blessed. Indeed, the entire future of *Klal Yisrael* was spelled out to him at that point. Had the Patriarch not gone back to pray, had he not “set his mind” to endanger himself again on a return journey, he would have lost the opportunity for all of the blessings which he received.

Veritably, there is no *mitzvah* to pray where one’s ancestors have prayed. Yet, Yaakov felt it incumbent to do so – even at the risk of endangering his life on a return trip. Why did he do so? *Rav Bakst* suggests that it was due to the Patriarch’s principled emotions. What is proper and suitable, what is equitable, is enough of a requisite for one to assume upon himself a goal that might even be fraught with danger. If it is the “right” thing to do – one does it. One should not wait to be told to take honorable action. He should set his mind to do so independently, of his own volition.

This was the idea behind Yaakov’s *neder*, vow, which would be his motivation and serve as the blueprint for his spiritual development. It was the prototype for establishing the Jewish nation. This vow would continue to inspire his upward spiritual growth and maintain his spiritual stamina until the vision in his dream was realized.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* suggests that this is a powerful lesson for us all. We must set goals and objectives and stick to them tenaciously – even if it requires hardship and adversity. One should never give up seeking the realization of his present goals. Indeed, the “goal” is often what pulls us along. The joy in crossing that “finish line” more than compensates for the vicissitudes that we have encountered along the way.