

He encountered the place and spent the night there...He took from the stones of the place which he arranged around his head, and lay down in that place. (28:11)

Yaakov *Avinu* left for Charan without any assurances. The road was dangerous. His brother, Eisav, who had sworn to do him bodily harm, was after him. He was on the way to the home of Lavan, the corrupt swindler, to a house filled with idols. One wonders what motivated him to go to Charan. Did Hashem promise him safe passage? No! Hashem was **allowing** him to go to Charan, but had made no promises. Yaakov was basically on his “own,” or as much on his own that anyone ever is. One is never on his own – only in his mind. Yet, Yaakov moved on: Be’er Sheva; the Negev; Midbar Yehudah; Shomron; Beit Shaan; the Lower Galil; the Golan Heights. He finally reached Charan – not a word from Heaven – as of yet. Indeed, he stopped at *Har HaMoriah*, the place of the future *Bais HaMikdash*, prayed, and continued on. He received no messages from Above. In fact, as the *Midrash* notes, Yaakov had no intention of stopping there. It was Heaven that delayed him. Yaakov was a man on a mission – a singular mission: arrive in Charan; go to Lavan and marry into the family. He had been blessed by Yitzchak *Avinu*. The sooner he executed his mission, the sooner the blessings would take effect.

When Yaakov arrived at Charan, he realized that he had passed the place where his father and grandfather had prayed, but he had not. He now returned on the treacherous road, with its challenges and obstacles, to pray to Hashem, to follow the family tradition. He was filled with regrets, with enough remorse to attempt the return trip. Hashem provided him with *kefitzas ha’derech*, a “quick” way of return by causing the earth to contract. Yes, it would cost him time and he would confront danger, but he had to correct his error.

We, too, have situations in which we realize that we have erred, and should go back. It remains on our minds, in our hearts. We regret. We feel bad. We know we should return, but we do not return. That “one step” is so difficult. One must make up his mind – not vacillate back and forth – before it is too late and the opportunity is lost. Without that commitment, we remain hanging in the balance – wishful losers, dreaming of what could be, but never will. When Yaakov made his decision to return, Hashem took over, and he received the blessings. Hashem **always** takes charge. Regrettably, we are not always prepared to make that “one step” commitment.

In his *sefer*, *Nitzotzos*, *Horav Yitzchak Hershkowitz, Shlita*, relates a compelling story concerning a Jewish prisoner incarcerated in one of America’s correctional institutions. A rabbi, who served as a volunteer chaplain at a prison near his community, visited the Jewish prisoners prior to *Rosh Hashanah*. After explaining the significance of the *Yom Ha’Din*, Day of Judgment, he added that one who accepts upon himself to perform a *kabalah tovah*, a good deed, to fulfill a *mitzvah* that seemed to “slip by” in the past year – in short, to begin the process of change – this acquiescence will quite possibly help to bring about a positive Heavenly verdict on the *Yom Ha’Din*.

When the rabbi concluded his lesson, he asked all of the men to sit quietly for five minutes and meditate concerning what they would like to do differently in the coming year. Which *mitzvah* would they add to their repertoire of *mitzvos*, which good deed? What would they change in their lives? We must bear in mind that none of these inmates was observant, or, for the most part, ever had been. This was a brand new experience for them. Even a simple *mitzvah* was considered a major endeavor for them.

After the five minutes were up, most of the group disbanded. One inmate approached the rabbi and asked to speak with him: "Rabbi, my name is Carl, and I have decided to become *Shabbos* observant, but I am not really sure what this means and how to go about it." The rabbi immediately explained that *Shabbos* is a difficult *mitzvah* to observe. It entails many *halachos*, with complex stringencies. Perhaps he would like to select something less compelling. What about *Tzitzis*, *Tefillin*, *davening*, learning a little? Carl was adamant: "I made up my mind. I am making a sincere pledge to observe *Shabbos*."

The rabbi agreed to bring him a volume in English detailing the laws of *Shabbos*. It was now up to Carl. The ball was in his court. One month later, the rabbi returned for his monthly visit and was surprised that Carl was not in attendance. The inmates explained to the rabbi that when Carl had received the *Hilchos Shabbos* book, he became totally engrossed in it. He was aware of how little he knew, and because he had promised to keep *Shabbos* he refused to do anything during that time. Since he was unaware of what was or what was not *muktzah*, forbidden to move on *Shabbos*, he touched nothing. He sat in his cell doing absolutely nothing all *Shabbos*. His friends fed him, because he refused to touch a dish, lest it be *muktzah*. After two *Shabbosos*, the warden summoned Carl to his office – not to be heard from again. Apparently, due to prison overcrowding, Carl was permitted to leave wearing an electronic monitoring device. Interestingly, out of the 120,000 prisoners in that state's prison system, only four from their prison were allowed to leave. Carl was one of those four fortunate individuals.

This was too much for the rabbi to digest. Carl had observed two *Shabbosos*, and he was immediately freed from prison! The rabbi sought out Carl and found him in a small apartment, diligently studying *Hilchos Shabbos*. It did not take long before *Shabbos* led to other *mitzvos*, and Carl became fully observant. His name was changed to *Reb Yehudah*, as he became an accepted member of the Orthodox Jewish community.

How did he do it? What was Carl's recipe for success? He was determined. He made up his mind to do something – and he did it. Nothing was going to get in his way. Determination, perseverance, single-mindedness and focus – these are all qualities we have inherited from the Patriarch Yaakov. When one decides to go forward, his determination guides him, until Hashem embraces him and carries him for the rest of the journey to success.