



### **Vayetzei: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back**

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

Yaakov received the blessings from his father but along with them, the scorn of his brother Esav. He fled to Charan to seek safety and sanctuary and a wife.

*“And Jacob left Beer Sheba, and he went to Haran. And he arrived at the place and lodged there because the sun had set, and he took some of the stones of the place and placed [them] at his head, and he lay down in that place. (Genesis 28:10-11).”*

The Talmud (Chullin 91b) paints a dramatic picture:

*“And Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran.” And it is written thereafter: “And he encountered the place, and he slept there, because the sun had set.” When Jacob arrived at Haran, he said: Is it possible that I passed a place where my fathers prayed, and I did not pray there? When he set his mind to return, the land contracted for him. Immediately the verse states: “And he encountered the place,” indicating that he arrived there miraculously. When he had finished praying and he wanted to return to Haran, the Holy One, blessed be He, said: This righteous man came to my lodging place and he will depart without remaining overnight? Immediately, the sun set before its proper time so that Jacob would stay overnight in that place.*

Yaakov passed right by Mount Moriah, the site of the *Akeyda* (biding of Isaac) and future site of the *Beis HaMikdash*. Only upon arriving in Charan did he realize his “mistake” and turned back around to return to this sacred site. The Chiddushei HaRim (Rav Yitzchak Meir Alter, 1799-1866) asks, *“Why didn’t Yaakov pray at this sacred site when leaving the Land of Israel? Why did he only realize the importance of praying in this spot after he had arrived in the city of Haran?”*

The Rebbe answers with a profound insight. Yaakov maintained a constant focus on the goal at hand. He was told by his parents to travel to his family, and that was the objective. Nothing else mattered. He possessed a singular focus – arrive at the house of Lavan, find refuge and safety from Esav, and hopefully, a life-partner. Yaakov understood how easy it is to get distracted and lose direction. He would not let anything, even *Har HaMoriah*, shift his focus from the objective at hand. Often, we begin down the path of accomplishment only to become sidetracked and distracted. We lose sight of our original goal and can end up on a path which leads to nowhere. Yaakov teaches us the power of singular focus. Identify your goals and objectives, set your mind to accomplish them, and do not get distracted.

But there is a follow up lesson as well. After all, upon reaching his desired destination, Yaakov turns around and goes back to *Har HaMoriah*. Yaakov possessed the trait of intentionality. Intentionality means studying your patterns of behavior and deciding what you do and do not want to continue doing in the future. Leading an intentional life means, I do not just “go with the flow;” I decide what works and what does not. I decide what I should and should not be doing. In the moment that Yaakov arrived in Charan, the city of Lavan, he realized that although he had stayed true to his goal, he missed out on an incredible opportunity – to pray at the site of his father’s near death experience and future site of the *Beis HaMikdash*. At that moment, Yaakov had a choice, he could say “oh well, better luck next time,” or he could actually do something about it.

Yaakov’s actions model for us a meaningful, two-pronged approach for successful living. First, stay focused. Identify your goals, dreams, and aspirations, and do not get distracted. Do not let other things, even meaningful things, come between you and your primary life objectives. Second, live life with intentionality. At times, I begin down a road because I think it is correct and meaningful. At times, I



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work towards certain objectives and goals because they feel right and fulfilling, and I then realize I was wrong or that I am giving up too many other meaningful opportunities for this one pocket of meaning. And then there are times when those endeavors which were important in the past may not be as important for my future. Find the strength to pivot. Find the strength to do things differently going forward. Find the strength to go backwards if it sets the stage for dramatic future growth.