

**"M**om, can you help me move this box?" I dragged and pulled, using my entire body weight.

"I need help too!" my kid brother, Aaron, yelled from his new room.

We had just moved to Florida the week before because our father had landed a job as a shul Rabbi. We were pretty happy — after all, the weather in Florida was a lot warmer than in New Jersey. But the part we hated about our move was that our father was the Rabbi of Bais Ment — an overstuffed family room/garage in someone's house down the block. The

congregation called it that funny name because it was like a basement shul, even though there weren't any real basements in Jacksonville, Florida. Actually, the shul was supposedly building a real shul. Dad had taken the job assuming that soon he'd be the Rabbi of a real place. But that would have to wait since it seemed the building part hadn't even started. We kids didn't really know why.

It was only that night at dinner, when I heard our parents discussing the situation, that I began to understand.

"They are waiting for the board to vote before they can buy the land," Dad said to Mom as he cut into his spaghetti. "After the vote, they'll purchase the land and building will begin."

"*Im yirzeh Hashem*," Mom said, picking up her glass of iced tea.

"But what if this board votes against the sale?" I asked.

"You were always smart for your age!" Dad smiled at me.

"Think good, and it will be good," Mom said.

"Will we have to *daven* in that stuffy room, I mean shul, for a long time?" My brother Aaron leaned forward to look at Dad.

"They told me that by next year, I should be the Rabbi of the newly built Northside synagogue."

"And it's going to be a two-story, limestone building, with a big chandelier in the main sanctuary," Mom added.

Dad continued, "The teen room will be big, with extra rooms for youth *minyanim*, and even a large *kiddush* room and social hall."

"And a playground for kids?" Aaron asked.

"Yes, that's what they promised!" Dad's eyes squinted as he smiled.

"I can't wait," I said, but I knew that I'd have to work on my patience.

The next week, school started. As the new kid in class, I had to answer a lot of questions. The

one that I hated answering was where my father worked. When

I said that he was the Rabbi of the Bais Ment shul, the kids would laugh and wonder why he'd want to work in that stuffy, overcrowded place. Some kid even cracked a not-so-funny joke and called my dad the "Basementter Rebbe." I tried explaining to them

that the shul would be moving and that soon it would most likely be the biggest shul in town, with a great youth *minyan* as well. That quieted them down, until the next time.

A few weeks into the school year, I came home and was studying for a *Gemara* test when I heard Mom on the phone with Dad. "They what? Uh... what could that be?" Mom coughed, something she did whenever she heard bad news.

"Mom, is everything okay?" I ran into the kitchen. She was still on the phone.

"The vote didn't go through." Mom hung up the phone, stared off into space, and shook her head back and forth.

"Does that mean that the shul won't be moving?" Mom took in a big breath of air. "The condominium board voted last night not to sell the land to our shul." She bit her lip and looked down at the kitchen floor.

"How can that be? Can we build somewhere else then?"

"The condo owners didn't want a shul on their property, next to their homes."

Mom coughed again and continued, "Zoning is a big issue for us, and land isn't easy to find for a shul, and of course, the price was right in this deal —" Mom paused.

"And?" I asked.

Mom continued, "And after a few years of research, the only real place for the shul is the north side of the Del-Ray Condominium property."

"And they don't want us there," I said. "So, are we stuck in the basement forever?"

"Looks that way." Mom looked at me, tears welling up. "Back to the drawing board, I guess."

"What if we change their minds?" Aaron said, tossing and catching a ball as he walked into the kitchen.

"It was a final decision." Mom looked at him.

That night, I tossed around in my bed. I had a bad feeling that something was stopping our shul from having the *mazal* it needed. Meanwhile, I'd be teased in school, it would be hard for everyone to *daven* in the cramped space, and even worse, Mom and Dad wouldn't be too happy.

*Why did we move? We should've stayed in New Jersey where things were much better.* I rolled from left to right, fixing my blankets, pulling and pushing them. *What were we going to do?*

I arrived home after school the next day as Mom was cooking up a chicken and rice dinner. Her shoulders seemed a little more slumped, and the usual smile on her face was gone. Dad walked in a few minutes later with a sigh.

"Mom told you the news, right?" He looked at me straight in the eyes.

"Yeah."

Just then, Aaron walked in. "What are we going to do?"

"*Daven!*" Mom and Dad answered at the same time.

"Everything that happens is from Hashem, and is always for our good," Dad said. "And we don't always know why things happen, because we can't always see the whole picture."

That night, I had a brainstorm. I wondered if it would work. The last time an idea had popped into my head like this, my brother and I had made a carnival for kids, and we'd ended up collecting a thousand dollars for a charity to help families who'd been affected by Hurricane Sandy. But what if this time my idea didn't work? It didn't matter — I knew that I had no choice but to try something to help our shul move. I would speak to Aaron and to Mom and Dad in the morning, and we'd see if it was possible.

*to be continued...*

# No Way Out

## PART 1





Raffi and his family move to Jacksonville, Florida, where their father gets a job as a shul Rabbi. But the new shul turns out to be an overstuffed family room in a house. When the shul finds a new location, things look promising, until the plans fall through. The shul can't move and the community is devastated. Raffi puts on his thinking cap and comes up with a possible way to save the day.

"Raffi, are you coming down for breakfast?" Mom called.

I ran down the stairs, eager to speak with everyone at breakfast. I had reviewed different ideas over

and over again in my mind last night. Could we run a carnival? No, how would that help? What about a *brachos* party? That one didn't feel right either. And then, just like that, the perfect idea popped in my head.

I sat down at the table. "I have a great idea that might help get us a new shul building."

"And what might that be?" Mom turned to face Dad, who was munching on his toast with jam.

"Well, drumroll, please." I looked at Aaron, who obliged by banging his hands on the table, shaking Dad's orange juice cup.

"You know how you and Mom mentioned that we need to *daven* about the shul building?"

"Yes."

"And you know how when we do *mitzvos*, it can bring *zechuyos* down on earth so that good things can happen?"

Dad looked up. "Sounds like what I have been talking about in my *drashos* in shul."

I continued, "Aaron, you and I will lead a *mitzvah* campaign that will tip the scales for the good, here in Jacksonville." My voice inched up a notch in volume. "We will do something that will bring us so many brownie points, as Mom calls it, that Hashem will be able to reward us with a shul." I sat back in my chair and looked around the table at my family.

Dad spoke first. "You really sound like the Rabbi's son, Raffi."

Mom said, "I'm curious to hear what project you came up with."

Aaron said, "Nu?"

I continued, "I heard about this project at Camp Kadimah last year. It's called The Mindful Mitzvah Campaign."

"Oh, I know! That's when we went around for a week in camp announcing our *mitzvos* before we did them," Aaron said.

I nodded my head and continued. "We also had those yellow Kavanah Kard bookmarks that we used to really focus on Hashem when we were *davening*."

"We didn't take that too seriously," Aaron laughed. "But in the end, I think I had the most *kavanah* I ever had, and it wasn't bad because I even won an expensive Frisbee for using my cards and announcing one *mitzvah* a day."

"Exactly! We will use prizes, there will be a chart for people to fill out, and the kids from the shul will help us to spread this." I stood up. "I have to get ready for school but what do you all think?"

Dad looked at me straight in the eye with his *nacha* look. "I think this is brilliant, because what we will be doing, basically, is collecting mindful *mitzvos* from as many people as possible."

"And maybe instead of being so distracted by our busy lives, we will focus on doing *mitzvos* correctly, and Hashem will, therefore, shower us with His *brachos*," Mom added.

"By the way, it does say in the *Shulchan Aruch* that one needs to have *kavanah* while performing *mitzvah*, so this campaign is really passing along a valuable lesson for all of us," Dad said.

I left the room and Aaron followed me out. "How are we going to make it happen?" he asked me.

"Dad will have to announce it in shul. After school, we can work on it."

Aaron continued, "Let's start it right away, like this Shabbos."

I grabbed my knapsack and ran out the door. He ran to keep up with me. "Hey, wait! How about you slow down and say, 'I am slowing down and walking with my brother to school for the sake of *ahavas Yisrael*, as commanded by Hashem,'" Aaron said.

I stopped until he had caught up with me on the sidewalk. He grabbed his arm and said, "I love my little brother Aaron, as commanded

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## PART 2



BASED ON A TRUE STORY



by Hashem, in the *mitzvah* of *v'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocho*."

"Great one!" Aaron smiled as the two of us walked arm in arm to school.

That next Sunday, Aaron and I worked from morning to night. We found an old Kavanah Kard that we had been given in camp, and we called the number on the bottom. A Mrs. Levine picked up the phone. She was so excited to hear that we were going to do a campaign and she promised to send us a box full of cards in different sizes by overnight mail — for free! We ordered cards for kids, as well as for adults, enough for our entire community. Next, we typed out a chart for participants to keep track of their mindful *mitzvos*. At the top, we typed:



**"I am fulfilling the *mitzvah* of \_\_\_\_\_, as Hashem commanded."**  
**Choose at least one *mitzvah* a day and say the above.**

We printed out another chart for people to earn checks. And at the bottom of the paper, we listed prizes for kids who participated.

That next week, we handed out the materials, and on Shabbos, Dad's entire *drashah* was about the importance of having *mitzvos* in mind and not just doing them by habit. Aaron and I decided that we'd call everyone on the shul list after Shabbos to sign them up for the campaign. We both had butterflies in our stomachs that entire weekend.

The next week, we received a phone call from a *frum* newspaper that interviewed our family about the Mindful Mitzvah Campaign. I couldn't believe it. I excitedly talked about how I had chosen to *bentch* with *kavanah* after meals, and that Aaron had picked his daily *mitzvah* of putting money in the *pushkeh* with mindfulness. I told the reporter that I had a better feeling about doing *mitzvos* since starting the campaign. It wasn't just another automatic thing now, like brushing my teeth or tossing my football with a friend. My *mitzvos* were taking on a new meaning. The article came out that next Shabbos, and we had eight new people who signed up for the campaign after reading it.

One month later, the kids in school were still filling out their charts, and some were even handing me their filled-out charts to earn the prizes. My parents couldn't go to the supermarket without being stopped by at least one person thanking them for helping them become more focused on their *mitzvos*. The campaign had taken on a life of its own.

Three months later, almost to the date on which we'd begun the campaign, I was sitting in our family room when we got the phone call.

Mom picked up. "Yes... really? I don't believe it!" Mom's head bobbed up and down. "Wonderful." She hung up the phone and dashed out of the room.

"Mom, what was that all about?" I stood up to follow her into the kitchen.

"Looks like the shul has another chance at the land by the condominiums." Mom paused. "Next Monday, there will be another opportunity for them to vote again."

I stood up and yelled, "I knew it! Hashem can do anything!"

"Well, it's not over until it's over," Mom said. "Don't get your hopes up too soon."

That next Monday was a staff-development day at school so we kids had the day off. Aaron and I waited outside the condominium office where the meeting was going to be held. We looked around and noticed that there were folks wearing handmade T-shirts that read, "Say no to the shul." Aaron and I looked at each other, and then down at the ground. I didn't want these people to know that I wasn't on their side.

"Aaron, do you think we'll win this time?" I whispered.

He whispered back, "I'm not sure. There are some people who sure don't want a shul here." We waited and our parents came to stand with us. A friend of our family was on the condominium association's board, and he told us that he'd let us know as soon as they had decided. After what seemed like hours, but was more like 45 minutes, we saw Mr. Frankel appear.

"Congratulations!" He ran towards our family and shook Dad's hand. "We won the vote! The shul can purchase the land next month."

I couldn't believe my ears. "Aaron, did you hear that?" I practically screamed. "We did it!"

"I am so proud of you both," Mom chimed in. I jumped for joy.

Dad was busy shaking hands with a few of the other shul members who had come over to hear the outcome. That night, Mom and Dad took us out to a restaurant to celebrate the great news.

Nine months later, our new shul was built and ready to open. And guess what we hung in a frame in the lobby for everyone to see? A beautiful Kids' Kavanah Kard! ■

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Before davening or doing any mitzvah it is important to say: "I am fulfilling the mitzvah of

\_\_\_\_\_ as Hashem commanded."

(Shulchan Aruch, סי' ס"א)

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