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PRISON + YOM KIPPUR + TALMUD = FREEDOM

During my seven years of shlichus in Alabama, I [**Rabbi Yitzchok-Meyer Lipszyc**] was the official Contract Rabbi of Maxwell Federal Prison Camp,¹ a large minimum security facility primarily for 'white-collar' convicts, in Montgomery. On the High Holy Days [two days of Rosh Hashanah and one more on Yom Kippur], my whole family would drive the 90 miles from our home in Birmingham,¹ and spend the entire holidays on prison grounds.

For the duration of the holidays, the fifteen or so prisoners were left under our jurisdiction. We prayed together, learned together, rapped together, walked together and ate together. The effect was three days of pure holiness, felt by prisoners and visitors alike.

I always had to lead all the services, including the long Rosh Hashana *Musaf* prayers and all five prayer services on Yom Kippur. After all, I was the only one who could read Hebrew, never mind actually lead the prayers.

Towards the end of Yom Kippur of 1988, as we were about to begin the *Ne'ilah* (closing) services, I turned around to face the worshippers and said: "We are now about to begin the closing prayers of Yom Kippur. This is our last ditch effort to ask G-d to forgive our past sins, before the gates of mercy close. *But*, with what justification are we requesting G-d to forgive our past?"

"Well, I have a proposal. before we begin *Ne'ilah*, let us all take just two minutes and choose one *mitzvah* (of the 613 commandments in the Torah) that each one of us will undertake to keep for the coming year. Then that *mitzvah* will be our defense argument, so that G-d forgives our past and seals the verdict for a good year."

I could see on their faces that my proposal was accepted. So I turned back to my siddur, spent the next two minutes thinking about my personal commitment, and then, without further hesitation, began *Ne'ilah*.

¹ Montgomery and Birmingham are the two largest cities in Alabama. Montgomery is the state capital.

After services were over, as everyone broke their fast, one inmate, a newcomer, approached me and asked if he could speak to me. When I answered in the affirmative, he told me his name is Carl and requested my help in fulfilling the commitment he undertook before Ne'ilah.

"Which mitzvah did you undertake," I asked? "To keep the Sabbath," he replied.

"Wow!" I thought to myself. "I don't think he could have picked a more difficult one." "If you don't mind my asking," I decided to question him further, "What made you choose that particular Mitzvah?"

"To be quite honest," he explained, "I didn't know any other of the Commandments and I remembered once hearing that G-d set up the Sabbath as a day of rest."

I explained that Shabbos was quite a difficult mitzvah to begin with, and that if he wished I could list for him other mitzvos which would be much easier to do.

His response was, "No thanks, Rabbi. I committed myself to Shabbos and I plan to stick with it."

Far be it for me to discourage a Jew from keeping Shabbos, so I simply asked, "and how can I help?"

"Well you see," he explained "I don't know the laws of Shabbos and I can't read Hebrew, so I need a list of the do's and the don'ts of Shabbos, in English. I don't need to hear the philosophy of it, just instructions." I told him that if he will come the next Tuesday to my weekly class, I would bring him the necessary books.

Those days there was only one book that set out *all* the laws in detail. The next Tuesday I brought him the two volume set titled "The Laws of Shabbos" by Rabbi Shimon Eider, a Lakewood NJ rabbinical scholar. Every Tuesday thereafter he came to my class and would tell me of his progress in regards to his Shabbos observance.

About six weeks later, I noticed that he was absent from the Tuesday class, so I asked one of the other inmates, "why didn't he come?"

"Rabbi, you are not going to believe this," he answered excitedly. "You know those two books you gave him to study? Well he read in one of them that if the Jews keep just two consecutive Shabbats, G-d would immediately set them free from exile. You also taught us that everything

that applies to all Jews, surely applies to each one of us as individuals as well. "'So' this fellow deduced, 'If I will be careful to keep all the laws of Shabbos for just two weeks, then G-d will send me home!'"

With this thought in mind, Carl stayed up four full nights and finished learning the rest of the two books, memorizing everything, in order for him to know what to do, and throughout the next two Shabbats he was very careful to follow the laws of Shabbos to a tee.

That very week after the second Shabbos, the federal prisons initiated a new program allowing people who have committed white collar crimes to be released under house arrest. Carl was the first one the prison authorities let out under that program. When we had our little *minyan* last Friday night we all danced and sang with him in celebration. And just the other day he actually left!"

As soon as Carl got out of jail he called us in Alabama. He asked us a number of questions, including a few about Shabbat.

I kept in touch with him for several years. He is married and has children. He keeps Shabbos and kosher, and puts on *tefillin* daily. Every year on Yom Kippur he takes upon himself an additional mitzvah.

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles after hearing it twice live from Rabbi Lipszyc and from the transcript of the story he kindly sent me. I also interspersed several sentences borrowed from his wife Leah's written version of the same episode.

*Biographic note:*

**Rabbi Yitzchak-Meyer Lipszyc** was appointed by the Lubavitcher Rebbe in 1970 to be an official Chabad emissary and help establish Jewish communities and spread Chassidus throughout the world. He and his wife Leah were successful shluchim in Michigan (1970-1982), Alabama (1982-1989), Florida (1989-1991) Brooklyn—the Rebbe's Kollel in Crown Heights (just him: 1991-1992), Crimea, Ukraine (1992-2019, but in the last five years running it from his office in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn).

From 2019 and still going strong, here in Tsfat, Israel. Rabbi Lipszyc has amazing personal stories; the wildest ones sound like they could be scripts for a movie or a novel!