

Vayeira, 5781

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The beginning of Parashat Vayeira is, by all accounts, shrouded in mystery. We are told that G-d “appears” to Avraham on a hot day, but does not seem to say anything. Immediately as this occurs, Avraham notices three strangers and runs to greet them, and the rest transpires from there. To help elucidate the incident, our Sages explain that Avraham was sick and suffering excruciating pain following his Brit Milah, and G-d, so to speak, came to perform the Mitzvah of Bikkur Cholim -- visiting the sick. In the middle of this visit, Avraham notices his potential guests, and runs to invite them.

There is a deep spiritual principle being conveyed here. We are often habituated, from our liturgy and elsewhere, to thinking of G-d as the Rofeh Cholim -- the Healer of the sick. We do not as frequently, however, remember that G-d is also the Mevaker Cholim -- the Visitor of the sick. These two roles are both critical, yet quite different. While the role of Rofeh Cholim is of incomparable importance, it is possible, at least theoretically, to be a Rofeh Cholim while remaining distant and disconnected. Nowadays, for example, computers can diagnose illnesses and prescribe medication, and curative surgeries can be performed under anesthesia without the patient and surgeon ever meeting. But Bikkur Cholim is, by its very nature, an experience of intimate connection. According to many authorities, one cannot fulfill Bikkur Cholim over the telephone. The essence of Bikkur Cholim is using the irreplaceable gift of one’s unique presence to illuminate the life and uplift the spirit of another person in pain, to let a person know that he or she is not alone in his or her suffering. While healing usually involves a patient coming to see the healer in an office setting, Bikkur Cholim demands that the visitor go to the patient, in order to remind the sufferer that no matter how rejected and lowly he or she may feel, he or she is still important and worthy of one’s time.

When the Torah teaches that G-d performs the Mitzvah of Bikkur Cholim, it means metaphorically that G-d comes to us and empowers us in our own states of pain, whether physical or emotional. He gives us the gift of His presence, coming closer to us in such a state than perhaps in any other state. We may not physically hear Him or see Him, but we can often feel His Presence, like a sailboat feels the invisible wind. Whenever we feel an inner force pushing us forward with strength and inspiration amidst our despondency, we are experiencing the “נותן ליעף כח” -- “*the One who gives strength to the exhausted*” (Yeshayahu 40:29). Whenever we are having a very hard time, and in the

midst of a storm of tears, we somehow experience a renewal of our hope, we are at that moment experiencing the One who says, “אנכי אנכי הוא מנחמכם” -- “*I, only I, am the One who comforts you*” (Yeshayahu 51:12). When our lives feel like they’re in an uncontrollable free fall and we unexplainably manage to come upon a period of stability and control, we are feeling the visit of the “צור הבלי בעת צרה” -- “*the Rock of my pain in time of distress.*” A Jew must never forget G-d’s Bikkur Cholim: while pain and illness is almost inevitably wrought with suffering and anguish, the consciousness of G-d’s closeness and encouragement can be a source of immense power, enabling people to draw upon strength that they never knew they had to continue fighting on in their struggles. Indeed, it is likely not coincidental that only after being visited by G-d did Avraham Avinu muster the strength to transcend his own pain, noticing and running to invite his guests.

Perhaps the concept of G-d visiting the sick is also alluded to by the Talmudic teaching (Nedarim 39b) that the Mitzvah of Bikkur Cholim applies “אפילו גדול אצל קטן” -- “*even for a great one visiting a small one.*” While the simple reading of this passage teaches that even a person of great stature must forego his or her honor to visit a “smaller” person who is ill, perhaps it may also allude to the ultimate “Great One” -- the Almighty-- visiting every person who is ill. Knowing that G-d visits us to connect with us and uplift us reminds us that even in the darkest moments, we have not been forgotten or cast aside.

While we may not be able to understand why G-d allows people to suffer from physical and emotional maladies in the first place, we do believe that such suffering is not a vindictive rejection. To the contrary, He is most present in a person’s life specifically during those darkest moments. This is the intent of the Talmudic teaching that “שכינה” -- “*the Divine Presence rests atop the head of one who is ill*” (Shabbat 12b), and that “בשעה שאדם מצטער שכינה מה לשון אומרת קלני מראשי קלני מזרועי” -- “*at the time that a person suffers, what does the Divine Presence say? I feel heavy from My head, heavy from My arm*” (Sanhedrin 46a). That is, G-d Himself is not distant and removed, but rather, fully present, sharing in a person’s pain in the most intimate of ways.

All too often, our relationship with G-d is confined to moments of prayer and Torah study, and when not engaged in these pursuits, our daily life experiences may not seem that different from those of a non-believer. This is a mistake. The goal of a Torah life is to live a life of “שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד” -- to feel G-d’s presence in every moment of our

lives, whether at the pinnacle of our joy or the depths of our sadness. May we be blessed to feel His encouragement and empowerment, and like Avraham Avinu, to in turn reflect this towards everyone we meet.