

A Guide To Bikur Cholim

– Visiting the Sick

Visiting the sick (or the “not yet well”) is one of the characteristic acts of kindness that define the life of a Jew. It is a simulation of divine chesed. The Talmud (Sotah 14a) cites the verse (Devarim 13:5) that “You shall follow G-d,” and explains: “Can a person really follow the divine presence, which is a consuming fire? Rather, follow G-d’s ways...just like G-d visits the sick, so too you should visit the sick.”

Thus, bikur cholim is an important mitzvah, but – like all mitzvot – it has a precise form and methodology. Most patients just want the company. They want to feel loved and thought about. They do not want to be forgotten, though they might be out of the “social loop”. - Often, people with the best intentions can stumble and inadvertently fail to fulfill the commandment properly, or, in the worst case, actually exacerbate the choleh’s predicament. It is important to know **that the essence of the mitzvah is to inquire after the choleh’s needs**, and especially to pray for his/her recovery. To leave without offering a specific blessing – “May Hashem send you a speedy refuah shleima from Heaven” – does not fulfill the mitzvah.

Beyond the technicalities of the mitzvah is the realization that the choleh is a human being, and not merely – like a lulav, so to speak – a cheftza shel mitzvah, the vehicle through which the commandment is performed.

Thus, one overcome by serious illness needs time to adjust to the new challenge. And it is a challenge; as is well known, we cannot always control what happens to us but we can control our reaction to it. Some cholim want to explore the spiritual dimensions of their illness, but others do not. One should be guided by the choleh, and not be too intrusive as to the spiritual state of the person unless the person raises the matter. Granted, the essential mitzvah is to tend to the physical needs of the person, but refuat hanefesh is often a part of a person’s recovery or his way of coping. That matter, nonetheless, is best raised by the choleh.

Even regarding the personal needs of the choleh, each person is different.. Some look for companionship and others prefer time for solitude or just recovery. The time frame for visits should be determined by the choleh, although Chazal state that one should not visit in the first three or last three hours of the day – early morning or late evening. (The laws of Bikur Cholim are found in the Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah, Chapter 335.) If the choleh says that “now is not a good time,” we must respect that –It is best not even to call early in the morning or late at night. One should first ascertain whether the timing of the visit is appropriate for the choleh – but also for the choleh’s family.

Make sure to call before visiting. Never walk into a home or room unannounced. Don’t plan on a long visit. A choleh an tire easily. It is better to visit briefly and more often, than to visit once for a long time. When the patient tires, leave courteously with a promise to return another time or to call. Stay long enough to put a smile on the face, but not too long as to see their smile tire.

One who wants to visit but has even just a sniffle, he/she must not visit. Per halacha, visitors should be up to date in vaccinations and flu shots. It is a halachic imperative of pikuach nefesh to wash hands before visiting.

The choleh's relatives should always be greeted not with the "pity face" but b'sever panim yafot, with a smile and pleasant countenance. They need not be reminded by your expression of their pain, nor do they need to be distracted from it.

Sometimes, the best approach is just to say "hello" with a smile, or send a card or message with simple words that you are thinking of them, davening for them, etc. Certainly, one can call and leave such a message on the answering machine and make sure to add that a return call is not necessary. When visiting have fun. Talk about things that make you both laugh together. Be creative. Above all – be normal (a good rule for life in every event) and supportive to the extent welcome.

It is very helpful when friends offer to help, but the help should be specific rather than generic – not "can I do anything for you?" or "Please let me know if I can do anything for you" – but specific: "I am going to X Market. What can I get for you?" Or, "can I cook for you [or for your children]?" "Can I drive you to the doctor?" Most times basic needs are being met but perhaps helping children with homework, carpooling, the dishes, paying bills, etc, might need attention.

If the choleh accepts your favor, then certainly be discreet. Halacha and HIPAA patient privacy laws are 100% compatible.. Do not share personal information about the choleh's condition with others. That is always the prerogative of the choleh. First and foremost, always respect the person's privacy and dignity.

If the choleh wishes to speak about his/her illness, then by all means be receptive and listen, but do not ask about specific symptoms, prognoses or other medical issues unless the information is volunteered. The choleh might be uncomfortable discussing certain matters. If you have a valid reason to suggest a different medical protocol, then do so, but do not suggest that the choleh change doctors in mid-treatment, as that can shake the patient's confidence and undermine his psychological state.

What should you talk about with the choleh? Certainly tell them what is happening in your life, but do not complain about your own life. It isn't about you. . If you see the choleh (or relative) in shul davening with kavana, it would be rude and improper to interrupt them for a general inquiry about their welfare. They, especially, need those moments of solitude with Hashem.

Understand, as well, that each person handles illness in a unique and subjective way. There are people whose true needs are known to them only in retrospect, whether they required more support or less. That applies to both the choleh and the family. And just as we would not criticize someone who is public about the illness, so too we should not castigate (even behind closed doors) someone who wants to remain private. There is no one right way . Ultimately, the choice is personal, and we must always recall that the illness is not the person and does not define the person. The person remains a human being entitled to respect and consideration, and has a life beyond the illness also.

And perhaps our main contribution to the welfare of the afflicted is to daven for them, to always have them in our thoughts and prayers. Davening helps – it helps the choleh but it also helps others develop a closer, more intimate connection with Hashem. That might be one reason why visiting the sick is a mitzvah whose fruit we consume in this world but whose principal remains for the world-to-come. It is a mitzvah that is not as easy as it looks, and in which we can all easily fall short, but one that properly done invariably makes us better people.

Sometimes, there is a particular mitzvah that the choleh is passionate about. Performing this mitzvah in their zechus is a meaningful thing evenone can do. With good intentions and even better words and deeds, we can bring great comfort to all cholim, as we pray to Hashem to bring them – and all cholei Yisrael – a refuah shleimah, a complete and speedy recovery.

Sources

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But you don't look sick.com

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