

## Mi Sheberakh: Prayers for Healing

by Rabbi Steven Rubenstein

A question that I sometimes struggle with and which is sometimes asked of me is 'when should I take someone off the *mi sheberakh* list'? There are two obvious times for taking someone off the list—when someone has died and when someone has fully recovered. But very often an illness entails many months of treatment and recovery. At what point in that recovery should they be taken off the list? What about a person who is dealing with a serious illness or condition which they will treat for many years? We may consider it as though they are never fully healed and in need of a *mi sheberakh* for years. Should they remain on the *mi sheberakh* list for the rest of their lives?

In asking these questions, I am encouraging us to think about how we should deal with the emotional and psychological effects of illness. You see, we could easily ask what is lost by saying a *mi sheberakh* for 'too long'? We should remember that when Jews first began reciting prayers for the sick, most people didn't stay sick for long. Either they recovered or, due to the limited possibility of treatment, they died. The idea of large numbers of people living with diseases for years and years and going through extensive treatments is part of the modern world.

We need to bring the *mi sheberakh* into our world by reserving it for times of critical illness and suffering. If we say a prayer before surgery, we should be thankful to God and say a prayer of thanks when we emerge from surgery.

Another note — a *mi sheberakh* is not a 'get out of jail free' card. It does not guarantee that a person will recover from illness. We already know this of course. This prayer is a request to God for 'healing of body and healing of spirit'. Both are important for a person facing illness. The *mi sheberakh* can also serve as a cue to the community that we should be performing the mitzvah of *Bikur Holim*, visiting the sick when appropriate. But the *mi sheberakh* is not magical and we should not treat it as such. We should banish the fear that if we stop saying a *mi sheberakh*, God stops caring for the person for whom we pray. Recognizing that someone has emerged from treatment, has survived a surgery and is recovering is a moment for thanks. Removing someone from the *mi sheberakh* list can be seen as a true act of love. Imagine telling someone beginning to emerge from an illness that you have been praying for them and, thankful for their progress, you have removed them from a list which is for the very ill. You are telling them that you have been there for them, will continue to be, and are thankful for their life. The impact of serious illness does not disappear easily, but when we see a person returning to daily activities and turning toward recovery, it is likely time to remove them from the *mi sheberakh* list.

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