

The Generation of Nechama

Shabbat Nachamu 2019

The Jewish Center

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Rather than give a formal sermon this morning, I thought that we could do a little learning together. Given that today is Shabbat Nachamu, I'd like to do some learning around the topic of Nichum Aveilim.

There are lots of Jews around the world who have never heard of Sukkos or Shmittah, but it seems just about everyone knows about paying a shivah call.

So what is it?

Where does it come from?

And what's the goal?

While it all seems so intuitive, both the background and its application may surprise you.

There's actually no explicit pasuk in the Torah that tells us to comfort the bereaved. It's part of a larger ethic.

And Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, says: What is the meaning of that which is written: "After the Lord your God shall you walk, and Him shall you fear, and His commandments shall you keep, and unto His voice shall you hearken, and Him shall you serve, and unto Him shall you cleave" (Deuteronomy 13:5)? But is it actually possible for a person to follow the Divine Presence? But hasn't it already been stated: "For the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God" (Deuteronomy 4:24), and one cannot approach fire.

He explains: Rather, the meaning is that one should follow the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed be He. He provides several examples. Just as He clothes the naked, as it is written: "And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin, and clothed them" (Genesis 3:21), so too, should you clothe the naked. Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, visits the sick, as it is written with regard to God's appearing to Abraham following his circumcision: "And the Lord appeared unto him by the terebinths of Mamre" (Genesis 18:1), so too, should you visit the sick. Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, consoles mourners, as it is written: "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son" (Genesis 25:11), so too, should you console mourners. Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, buried the dead, as it is written: "And he was buried in the valley in the land of Moab" (Deuteronomy 34:6), so too, should you bury the dead.

This is what we call in Latin *imitatio Dei*.

1 תלמוד בבלי מסכת סוטה יד.
ואמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא, מאי דכתיב: אחרי ה' אלהיכם תלכו? וכי אפשר לו לאדם להלך אחר שכינה? והלא כבר נאמר: כי ה' אלהיך אש אוכלה הוא! אלא להלך אחר מדותיו של הקב"ה, מה הוא מלביש ערומים, דכתיב: ויעש ה' אלהים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבישם, אף אתה הלבש ערומים; הקב"ה ביקר חולים, דכתיב: וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא, אף אתה בקר חולים; הקב"ה ניהם אבלים, דכתיב: ויהי אחרי מות אברהם ויברך אלהים את יצחק בנו, אף אתה נחם אבלים; הקב"ה קבר מתים, דכתיב: ויקבר אותו בגיא, אף אתה קבור מתים.

והלכת בדרכיו

Part of our job in this world is to imitate the ways of Hashem. And the gemara is telling us that Hashem paid a shivah call; so we should do the same.

What's the source?

After Abraham's death, God blessed his son Isaac, who then lived near Beer Lahai Roi.

2 בראשית פרק כה פסוק יא
ויהי אחרי מות אברהם ויברך אלהים את יצחק בנו וישב יצחק עם באר לחי ראי:

3 רש"י בראשית פרק כה פסוק יא
ויהי אחרי מות אברהם ויברך וגו' - נחמו תנחומי אבלים.

But the Rambam seems to have a different idea:

It is a positive commandment of Rabbinic origin to visit the sick, comfort mourners, to prepare for a funeral, prepare a bride, accompany guests, attend to all the needs of a burial, carry a corpse on one's shoulders, walk before the bier, mourn, dig a grave, and bury the dead, and also to bring joy to a bride and groom and help them in all their needs. These are deeds of kindness that one carries out with his person that have no limit.

Although all these mitzvot are of Rabbinic origin, they are included in the Scriptural commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself." That charge implies that whatever you would like other people to do for you, you should do for your comrade in the Torah and mitzvot.

4 רמב"ם הלכות אבל פרק יד הלכה א
מצות עשה של דבריהם לבקר חולים, ולנחם אבלים, ולהוציא המת, ולהכניס הכלה, וללוות האורחים, ולהתעסק בכל צרכי הקבורה, לשאת על הכתף, ולילך לפניו ולספוד ולחפור ולקבור, וכן לשמח הכלה והחתן, ולסעדם בכל צרכיהם, ואלו הן גמילות חסדים שבגופו שאין להם שיעור, **אע"פ שכל מצות אלו מדבריהם הרי הן בכלל ואהבת לרעך כמוך, כל הדברים שאתה רוצה שיעשו אותם לך אחרים, עשה אתה אותן לאחיך בתורה ובמצות.**

Consoling mourners is subsumed under the larger rubric of loving one's neighbor. But the Rambam goes even further.

5 רמב"ם הלכות אבל פרק יד הלכה ז
יראה לי שנחמת אבלים קודם לבקור חולים, שנחום אבלים גמילות חסד עם החיים ועם המתים.

So here the Rambam introduces us to a new concept. It's possible, he says, to do a kind of chessed even for people who are no longer in this world.

And Nichum aveilim is both! It would take precedence over bikkur cholim because there's a dual component to nichum aveilim – it benefits both the living and the dead.

But the Rambam's not making this up.
There's a very early precedent in the gemara.

Rav Yehuda said: In the case of a deceased person who has no comforters, i.e., he has nobody to mourn for him, ten people should go and sit in his place [and accept condolences.] A certain person died in Rav Yehuda's neighborhood and he not have any comforters, i.e., mourners. Every day, Rav Yehuda would take ten people and they would sit in his place, in the house of the deceased. After the shivah, the decedent appeared to Rav Yehuda in his dream and said to him: Put your mind to rest, for you have put my mind to rest.

6 שבת דף קנב עמוד א-ב
אמר רב יהודה: מת שאין לו מנחמין הולכין עשרה בני אדם ויושבין במקומו. ההוא דשכיב בשבבותיה דרב יהודה לא היו לו מנחמין, כל יומא הוה דבר רב יהודה בי עשרה, ויתבי בדוכתיה. לאחר שבעה ימים איתחזי ליה בחילמיה דרב יהודה, ואמר ליה: תנוח דעתך שהנחת את דעתי.

There's two points I want to make here.

7 שבת דף קנב עמוד א
אמר רב חסדא נפשו של אדם מתאבלת עליו כל שבעה.

First, on a technical level, the neshama of the person – the gemara says – is present for the whole shivah.

And second, more conceptually: It can't be that a person left this world without making a mark. So we respond in kind. It can't be that we would allow person to die without being noticed. So if there's no one to sit shivah, we sit shivah!

But that's just the most extreme example. In a regular case where there are mourners, there's still a dimension of nichum aveilim that has nothing to do with the mourners. There's always a dual component. Nichum aveilim is for both the living and the deceased. Of course there's a chesed component to helping ease the burden of a person who's in pain; but there's a second element which honors the person who's gone independent of anyone sitting shivah.

Which might be one of the reasons we say ינחם אתכם in the plural.

8 דברי סופרים, מאת ר' נחום יברוב, פרק כח:כו
ויש אומרים אפילו ליחיד "ינחם אתכם" ואולי הוא משום דהניחום הוא גם למת ולכן אומרים אתכם – כלומר אותך ואת המת.

I would say in the vast majority of cases, we pay a shiva call to people we know. The mourners are known to us. A friend or a neighbor loses a relative and we visit them.

But sometimes it was the decedent who was known to us and we don't know the aveilim at all. And we think to ourselves, "They don't know me. It's awkward. I'm a complete stranger." That may be so, but there's a dual purpose. Whether or not your visit brings comfort to the mourners you don't know – and it probably will – your very presence in the beis avel will bring kavod to the person who's passed away.

Every community has its strengths and weaknesses. It happens to be that our community takes very seriously and I don't take it for granted. But there's always more that we can do. So let me conclude with three very practical suggestions.

First: We shouldn't think of shivah as being a mitzvah that devolves exclusively upon friends and family. I can't tell you how many times a member has helped make a minyan at a stranger's house and told me, "Wow – what a powerful experience that was." Nor can I tell how you how appreciative people are when they get visits from members of the community just because they're members of the community. Part of what it means to belong to a shul is that we step up for one another. So here's my challenge: Just one time this year – when you get a shiva email from the shul about someone you don't know who's passed away – pay a shivah call. And you'll say, "You don't know me. I'm sorry to meet you under these circumstances, but I'm a member of The Jewish Center. When I saw that a fellow member of my shul was sitting shivah, I wanted to come and offer my condolences." I guarantee you won't regret having spent those 20 minutes doing a mitzvah no one was expected.

Second: And this is a continuation of the first point: Come to a shivah minyan. It's a message I share with both men and women. We all need to daven. Why not do it every so often in the context of a shivah home where you'll presence will be so additive.

And finally, I want to share with you a comment of the Nitei Gavriel.

It is proper to arrange shivah visits at various times such that there will be people with the mourners at all time. It is not advisable for everyone to visit at once and leave him/her all alone the rest of the time... It is not as most people presume – that it is sufficient to comfort the mourner one time... The great Tzaddik of Ger used to pay shivah visits daily....

9 נטעי גבריאל מאת גבריאל ציננער, פרק פה הערה ג
ג. מן הראוי לסדר לילך לנחם אבלים בזמנים שונים, כרי שיהיו
אצל האבלים אנשים בכל פעם, ולא שכולם יבואו לנחם בפעם אחת
ורוב הזמן ישבו בדר (ז).
ג) דרכי החיים סימן ד' ס"ב, ולא כמו שמבינים ההמון, שדי בפעם אחת
לנחם האבל, וכיכ בספר אמרי אמת ליקוטנים, שהגה"ק מגור זצ"ל נהג לילך
לנחם האבל בכל יום ויום עיי"ש, ועכ"פ מי שהולך לבית האבל כמה פעמים,
צריך כל פעם לנחם. וכיכ תפארת בנים על קשו"ע סי' ר"ז שכן נהג צדיק
אחד.

Nichum Aveilim isn't Tashlich. You go one time and you can check the box because you've gone. Because in the end nichum aveilim isn't about you – it's about the mourners and the person they've lost. If you want to perform the mitzvah of nichum aveilim in its highest form, once isn't enough. Real nichum aveilim means a kind of holistic approach that insures the mourner feels cared for every day that he or she is sitting shivah.

In the merit of our performance of this special mitzvah – in the merit of our consoling mourners in their time of need – may Hashem console us in ours.