



The Parsha in Practice

Hineni - I Am Here (for You)

In its first two verses, the Parsha begins with descriptions of two of the great interpersonal Mitzvot: Bikur Cholim, visiting the sick, and Hachnasat Orchim, hospitality.

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהֵי ה' בְּאֵלְנֵי מַמְרֵה וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פְּתַח־הַאֹהֶל כְּתָם הַיּוֹם:
וַיֵּשָׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים נֹצְבִים עָלָיו וַיֵּרָא וַיָּרַץ
לְקָרְאָתָם

The LORD appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them...

The Gemara in Sotah (14a) explains that Avraham was still recovering from his Brit Milah and that G-d's appearance was Bikur Cholim, a visit of the sick. During the visit, Avraham sees guests and immediately rushes to welcome and serve them, thus engaging in the mitzvah of Hachnasat Orchim.

We are probably most familiar with the lessons contained in this episode relating to the primacy of hospitality. How great is hospitality? So great, that Avraham was even willing to defer an encounter with G-d to busy himself with taking care of the people passing his tent. Can we learn any additional lessons from this short encounter that relate to visiting the sick? It seems so.

G-d appears to Avraham but doesn't say much of anything. There are no words, instructions or commands shared. While the Gemara (Bava Metzia 86b) suggests that G-d asked Avraham how he was, the pesukim themselves do not indicate that there was any conversation, only an "appearance." Rav Moshe Feinstein points out that while there are generally two reasons that we visit the sick, to assist in their care and to develop the first-hand motivation to pray for them, this visit has neither of those components. G-d does not need a "visit" to do either of those things. Rather this visit shows that even if a one cannot or will not accomplish the practical goals of a visit, one's usefulness doesn't matter as much as their presence does.

Avraham was pained by the lack of guests that day. Rashi explains how G-d had made it hot so that he wouldn't be bothered by guests but as Rashi describes it, he was even more pained because there was no one to care for. R' Moshe wonders what was this pain about? It's not like he wasn't doing what he could. He was waiting outside for people who might come. He wasn't calling in sick while guests passed him by. There just was no one to help.

But again, the fulfillment of chesed isn't always about the practical and the physical. It's about the emotional, it's about needed to "do" even if there is nothing that needs doing. Our Parsha's first two pesukim teach that I can fulfill a mitzvah of Bikur

Cholim while provide nothing substantive and can pine to fulfill the mitzvah of Hachnasat Orchim even if no one actually needs lodging.

"Do you need anything?" is often a question that doesn't get an affirmative answer. Specific requests "Can I do/get ____?" is more likely to get a response. That does not mean that the general request to help is not chesed. Don't let the perfect be the enemy of doing good.

A person visits a shiva. The emotion is tense in the room (on the patio?) and they don't feel that they can provide words of succor or a pithy, reassuring phrase that will "help." That's ok. In his book, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, Rabbi Maurice Lamm writes of how "Sad, muttered words are clumsy openers of the heart compared with the whisper of soft eyes." With masks on, our soft eyes are pretty much all we can offer. The Gemara in Berachos (7b) goes further and relates that the most important contribution we can offer at a shiva home is... wait for it... *silence*.

Bikur Cholim is hard. Nichum Aveilim is hard. Checking in on someone who is lonely is hard. What do I say? What do I do? Often people "change the topic," finding sports or the weather less fraught and easier to discuss. Thinking that we need to "solve problems" and remove people's pain through our words is most of our challenge. We fear the uncomfortable conversation and avoid people who might stimulate one, even if they might need our help. In G-d's version of Bikur Cholim, G-d is mute. He's not making anything better, but He's also not making it worse. He's just sharing a moment with someone who is suffering. So too, our simple presence widens the shoulders on which the difficult weight is borne.

The past couple of weeks have been challenging in terms of loss to our shul. The ability to provide to others has been hampered by Covid-19 restrictions and logistics, minyanim have also been difficult to populate in shul and at shivas due to the timing and cold weather. The past months have had us very focused on ourselves, our safety, and the safety of our families and it would be understandable if, when it comes to others, we slack somewhat. There's so much to be anxious about without even considering the anxieties of others. Yet, it is incredible to see that in spite of the challenges we may personally face, when others are in need - and even if we cannot "provide" as we once had - we still appear.

As the children of Avraham, even if we are limited, we want to do. We want to help others and sometimes we are at a loss as to how. The pandemic has made helping and "appearing" as we used to very difficult. As it was for Avraham, this can be painful to us, as "givers," as well. So far, we have adapted. We have provided tents, heaters, speaker systems, and even propane. We've run errands, checked in, dropped off and picked up. And we have "appeared" in so many new ways. We have bundled up and shivered together and we have Zoomed, called, texted, and emailed.

We should be proud of what we do for each other and how we've "shown up." Avraham is praised for his declaration of "Hineni - I am here" when G-d asks him to "be there" for the Akeidah. We have responded with "Hineni" when asked to be there for each other. May we be blessed to not need the kindnesses that we - thankfully - have in abundance.

Shabbat Shalom!

Shmuel Ismach