

Restoring our Humanity: The *Mitzva* to Visit the Sick

Dr. Erica Brown

(Source translations are from sefaria.com)



"It is in moments of illness that we are compelled to recognize that we live not alone but chained to a creature of a different kingdom, whole worlds apart, who has no knowledge of us and by whom it is impossible to make ourselves understood: our body."

Marcel Proust

Reflective Questions:

- If you find it hard to visit people who are sick, take a few minutes to explain.
- If you find it inspiring to visit sick people, what moves you about the mitzva?
- Consider a time when your body let you down. Describe it.
- Think of chronic pain and write down how you think it impacts the way that people see themselves, especially if *you* suffer from any chronic pain.
- Why is sickness often so isolating?

Jewish Text Resources

Biblical Texts

Text #1: Genesis 17:24-27, 18:1

Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he circumcised the flesh of his foreskin, and his son Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. Thus Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised on that very day; and all his household, his homeborn slaves and those that had been bought from outsiders, were circumcised with him. The Lord appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot.

Text Questions:

- The first record of visiting the sick occurs in Genesis 18 when God visits Abraham after his circumcision. What is significant about God practicing this mitzva before humans do?
- This first biblical account of healing happens to our first patriarch, who is shown at a vulnerable moment. Why?
- Why is the heat of the day connected to the visit?

Text #2: Numbers 12:1-16

Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?" they asked. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?" And the Lord heard this. (Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.) At once the Lord said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, "Come out to the tent of meeting, all three of you." So the three of them went out. Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When the two of them stepped forward, he said, "Listen to my words: 'When there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, reveal myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?' The anger of the Lord burned against them, and he left them. When the cloud lifted from above the tent, Miriam's skin was leprous—it became as white as snow. Aaron turned toward her and saw that she had a defiling skin disease, and he said to Moses, "Please, my lord, I ask you not to hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed. Do not let her be like

a stillborn infant coming from its mother's womb with its flesh half eaten away." So Moses cried out to the Lord, "Please, God, heal her!" The Lord replied to Moses, "If her father had spit in her face, would she not have been in disgrace for seven days? Confine her outside the camp for seven days; after that she can be brought back." So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not move on till she was brought back. After that, the people left Hazeroth and encamped in the Desert of Paran.

Text Questions:

- What exactly were Miriam and Aaron gossiping about?
- Why is it Miriam and not Aaron who gets stricken with an awful disease?
- Why does Moses' prayer not work here?

Rabbinic Sources

Text #3: *Ethics of the Fathers* 1:2

The world rests upon three things, Torah, service, and acts of kindness.

Text # 4: Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 127a

There are six things the fruit of which a person eats in this world, while the investment remains for him in the world to come: hospitality, visiting the sick, meditation in prayer, early attendance in the study hall, rearing one's children in Torah and judging one's neighbor favorably. . . . We also learn that there are other things which a person does in this world and enjoys the fruits in this world while the investment remains for him in the world to come: honoring one's parents, practicing acts of loving kindness and making peace between people. The study of the Torah surpasses them all.

Text Questions:

- These two texts present kindness as a foundational value. Why, in a legal system so measured, are there no measurements for acts of kindness?
- Through the lens of text #3, do you consider visiting the sick a service or an act of kindness?
- How does visiting the sick cohere with the other mitzvot mentioned in text #4?

Selections from Babylonian Talmud *Nedarim* 49b

Text #5

Rav Helbo fell ill. There was no one who came to visit him. Rav Kahana said to the Sages: Didn't the incident involving one of the students of Rabbi Akiva who became sick transpire in that manner? In that case, the Sages did not enter to visit him, and Rabbi Akiva entered to visit him and instructed his students to care for him. And since they swept and sprinkled water on the dirt floor before the sick student, he recovered. The student said to Rabbi Akiva: My teacher, you revived me. Rabbi Akiva went out and taught: With regard to anyone who does not visit the ill, it is as though he is spilling blood, as it could be that the sick person has no one to care for him. If there are no visitors, no one will know his situation and therefore no one will come to his aid.

Text Questions:

- What is odd about this story and what is comforting about it?

Text #6

When Rav Dimi came from Eretz Yisrael to Babylonia he said: Anyone who visits the ill helps him live, and anyone who does not visit the ill causes his death. In what way are his actions the cause of that result? If we say that anyone who visits the ill pleads for mercy from God that he will live, and anyone who does not visit the ill pleads for mercy that he will die, does it enter your mind that he would pray that the sick person will die? Rather, anyone who does not visit the ill does not plead for mercy for him, neither that he will live nor that he will die. Since he might have saved the sick person with prayers had he visited, his failure to visit is tantamount to causing his death.

Text Questions:

- What is the relationship of prayer to healing in this story, and how do you understand the theological implications of this passage?

Text #7

On the first day that he (Rava) was ill, he would say to his family: Do not reveal to any person that I am ill, so that his luck not suffer. From this point forward, when his situation deteriorated he would say to them: Go and proclaim in the marketplace that I am ill, as thereby let all who hate me rejoice over my distress, and it is written: "Rejoice not when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles; lest the

Lord see it, and it displease Him, and He turn away His wrath from him" (Proverbs 24:17-18). And let all who love me pray that God have mercy upon me.



Text Questions:

- This story relates some of the tensions of letting others know when you or someone else is sick. Are you more private or more public about your health issues and what are the benefits and disadvantages of either choice?

Text #8

If one visited the ill, what is his reward? Rav said: He is spared from the judgment of Gehenna. Rather, the question is: What is his reward in *this* world? Rav continues: His reward is as it is written: "The Lord will preserve him, and keep him alive, let him be called happy in the land; and deliver not You him unto the greed of his enemies" (Psalms 41:3). He elaborates: "The Lord will preserve him" from the evil inclination; "and keep him alive" and spare him from suffering; "let him be called happy in the land" means that everyone will be honored from their association with him...

Text Questions:

- The Talmud identified spiritual benefits of visiting the sick. What are they and can you related to them?

Text #9

Let one not visit a sick person, neither during the first three hours of the day, nor in the last three hours of the day, so that he will not be diverted from praying for mercy. Rav Sheisha elaborates: During the first three hours the sick person is relieved, as after a night's sleep, his suffering is somewhat alleviated, and the visitor will conclude that there is no need for prayer.

Text Questions:

- One of the chief reasons to visit a sick person is to pray on his or her behalf. How does that change the visitor and the one who is visited?

Jewish Law

Shulkhan Arukh (16th Century Jewish legal code by R. Yosef Karo), *Yoreh De'ah* – selections from #335 with legal glosses of R. Moses Isserles

Text # 10

It is a religious duty to visit the sick. Relatives and friends may enter at once and strangers after three days. If the sickness overtakes him both may enter forthwith. Even a prominent person must visit a humble one; even many times a day and even if the visitor is of his affinity. One who increases [his visits] is considered praiseworthy, provided he does not trouble him. *Gloss*: Some say that an enemy may visit a sick person. However, this does not seem plausible to me; but he should not visit a sick person nor comfort a mourner whom he hates, so that [the latter] should not think that he rejoices at his misfortune, and thereby feel depressed. Thus seems to me [to be the correct view].

Text # 11

When one prays for him (the sick individual)—if in his presence, one may pray in any language one desires; if one prays, not in his presence, one should pray only in Hebrew. One should combine him with other Jewish sick by saying, 'May the Omnipresent have compassion upon you in the midst of the sick of Israel.'

Text # 12

One must not visit those suffering with bowel diseases or with eye diseases, or from headaches. And likewise, whosoever is very sick and conversation is injurious to him must not be visited in his presence, but one may enter the outer chamber and ask and inquire regarding him... and hear his suffering and pray for him.

Text # 13

One must visit the sick of the Gentiles in the interests of peace.

Text Questions:

- Why is there a different waiting period for relatives, friends and strangers?
- Why are there class distinctions here and what does that say about the nature of healing?

- What is unusual about the prayer notations for the sick here?
- All illness is not the same when it comes to visitation. Why?

Contemporary Thoughts on Visiting the Sick

Letty Pogrebin, *How to be a Friend to a Friend Who's Sick* (Public Affairs: 2014)

"Illness and misfortune lay bare the anxiety of proximity: only when we're ready to share a major problem do we discover where our friends fall on the spectrum of closeness, whether they have a place in our emotional inner sanctum and at our bedside, or whether they're to be kept at arm's length and out of the loop. The ultimate power of one friend over another is the power to grant or deny intimacy. When we trust someone with the turmoil of our body, soul (or bank account), we give them the key to our core..." (page 55)

"Here are seven lines sick people said they *do* want to hear:

'I'm sorry this happened to you.'

'Tell me how I can help.'

'I'm here if you want to talk.'

'Just give me my marching orders.'

'That sounds awful; I can't even imagine the pain.'

'I'm bringing dinner.'

'You must be desperate for some quiet time. I'll take your kids on Saturday.'" (page 45)

Text Questions:

- What makes those sentences register so positively? The fact that they express empathy, availability, or both?

Sometimes, alongside medical treatment, we need the touch of another to heal our pain

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

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There was a very moving story this week, about one of the competitors in the Invictus Games. He was a former mine specialist in the Royal Navy, who had suffered post-traumatic stress disorder. He was playing a match of wheelchair doubles tennis when he heard the sound of a helicopter overhead, and, traumatised, he froze. Immediately, his team mate went over to him, held him, spoke to him and got him to sing the song *Let It Go*, from the movie *Frozen*. And slowly he unfroze and together they went on to win the match.

It was a poignant reminder of a fundamental truth, that sometimes, alongside medical treatment, we need the touch of another to heal our pain.

Lately I've been thinking of how our era will be seen in retrospect. Every age worships something. Often it's religion, but in the not so distant past it's also been the nation, or the race, or the political ideology. The more I've thought about it, the more I've concluded that what we worship today is the self. We seek self-esteem, self-respect, self-expression, and self-help. And it's hugely liberating. But every form of worship has its downsides: in this case, anxiety, loneliness and depression. And it isn't lifted by having lots of friends on smartphones and social media. It needs being together face to face.

The Talmud tells the story of a rabbi who was a faith healer. All he had to do was lay his hands on someone and they were cured. Then he fell ill and called for a friend to come and heal him. Why couldn't he cure himself, asks the Talmud. And answers: because a prisoner cannot release themselves from prison. Sometimes self help isn't enough. It needs the touch or the word of an other.

That's why community is so important. It's where we meet face to face and give each other strength. It's where people know who we are, and miss us when we're not there. Community is society with a human face. It's the redemption of our solitude.

Which is another reason to salute the Invictus Games and Prince Harry who created them. As the unfrozen tennis player said: the games gave him back his purpose and his pride. "I feel," he said, "part of a team again, like I belong."

God says about us in the Bible: "it's not good to be alone." A good society is a community of communities. Not just an array of selves.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks is an internationally acclaimed author and speaker, and winner of the 2016 Templeton Prize for his "exceptional contributions to affirming life's spiritual dimension." To learn more about Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, please visit his website: www.rabbisacks.org.

Halachic Parameters of the Mitzvah of Bikur Cholim

Rabbi Moshe Walter

*Excerpted from the upcoming **The Making of a Mensch, The Laws of Interpersonal Relationships**, by Rabbi Moshe Walter*

The primacy of the *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim*, visiting the sick, is writ large in the Torah and Chazal. The Torah tells of God himself going to visit Avraham who was not feeling well following his circumcision. The Gemara, commenting on this episode, teaches that if one pines to be like God, visiting the sick is one way to achieve this goal; just as Hashem went to visit Avraham when he was ill, so to, one should visit the sick, thereby acting like Hashem.¹ The importance of the *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim* can also be seen from the fact that the Mishnah and Gemara state that one receives reward for fulfilling this commandment both in this world and the world to come.² The Gemara further comments that the *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim* is unique because it has no limit as to how much it can be performed; the more one engages in the *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim*, the more praiseworthy it is³. Finally, the Gemara posits that this *mitzvah* is incumbent upon one and all, including a great Torah scholar or one who is advanced in age.⁴

Questions

- What can and should a visitor do to benefit a patient that one is visiting?
- How does one fulfil the *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim*?
- Is one required, permitted, or prohibited to visit a patient with a contagious disease?

Physical help

The Gemara records the following story. A student of Rav Akiva fell ill, and none of the sages went to visit him. Later, Rav Akiva came to visit, and had his student's floor swept and dusted. The student then said to Rav Akiva, "You have brought me back to

¹ Maseches Sotah 14a based on Bereishis chapter 18 verse 1 as cited by Rashi ad loc.

² Maseches Peah chapter 1, Mishnah 1, Maseches Shabbos 127a

³ Maseches Nedarim 39b, Rambam Hilchos Avel chapter 14 halachah 4, Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah siman 335 seif 2

⁴ Maseches Nedarim 39b, Rambam Hilchos Avel chapter 14 halachah 4, Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah siman 335 seif 2

life". Rav Akiva subsequently taught that whoever does not visit the sick is as if he spills blood.⁵ Many *rishonim* understand that this story shows that the most fundamental aspect of visiting the sick is tending to the patient's physical needs, because if the patient's physical needs are not cared for, a patient can slip away.⁶

Spiritual help

The Gemara, piggybacking on the above story, states that one who does not visit a patient will be unaware of the patient's status, and hence, unable to properly pray for the patient's recovery.⁷ From here we see that aside from the physical support that the visitor should provide, another critical aspect of visiting the sick is the spiritual component, praying on behalf of the sick patient.⁸ Praying for the patient is such a crucial component of the visit that the Ramban writes that one who visits the sick but does not pray for the patient's recovery has not fulfilled the *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim*.⁹ Praying for the patient allows one to express one's care and concern for the patient, appealing to God to look after, and send a recovery to the patient.¹⁰

Emotional help

A third aspect of visiting the sick is providing emotional support and being empathetic. From the story of God visiting Avraham when he was not feeling well, we see nothing about God offering Avraham physical or spiritual help. God visited Avraham in order to provide him with encouragement and strength as he was recovering from his circumcision. Because Avraham was in pain, God visited him to be a source of comfort. From here we see that another component of visiting the sick is being emotionally supportive. This support can express itself passively or proactively. Proactively, one can cheer up a sick person with a kind word, words of strength, encouragement, being empathetic, or even a joke. Passively, being there for the patient, so the patient has someone to talk to, and knows that the visitor is listening, is very comforting. Furthermore, just being in the room, even if the patient cannot express anything can at times also be of solace to the patient.

⁵ Maseches Nedarim 40a

⁶ Rashi, Rosh, and Shitah Mekubetzes to Nedarim ibid, Ramban Toras Ha'adam cited by Beis Yosef Yarah Deah siman 335

⁷ Maseches Nedarim 40a with commentary of Rosh ibid. Tur and Beis Yosef citing Ramban in Toras Ha'adam page 17

⁸ Regarding praying for the terminally patient see Iggeros Moshe Choshen Mishpat 2:74 #4, Tzitz Eliezer 5: Ramat Rachel 5, Teshuvos V'hanhagos 2:82, and Sefer Mitzvas Bikur Cholim chapter 24 for varying approaches.

⁹ Beis Yosef ibid

¹⁰ See Sefer Chut HaMeshulash HaChadah Toldos HaRav Akiva Eiger regarding Rabbi Akiva Eiger's daily practice regarding praying for the sick

Furthermore, a patient who has a nice stream of visitors is likely to attract the attention of the hospital staff. This attention is more often than not a positive, as the staff will likely pay careful attention to a patient that others are paying careful attention to as well. Moreover, a visitor who thanks the staff and expresses appreciation for the care and concern that the staff is providing will engender good will, and continued support for the patient.

Conclusion

The ideal way to fulfil the *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim* is to visit the sick in person and help with their physical and emotional needs, while concurrently praying for their complete recovery. If one is unable to fulfil all three aspects of the *mitzvah*, certainly one should do whatever one can to fulfil the remaining aspects of the *mitzvah*, and to make sure that someone is tending to those aspects that one cannot fulfil oneself.

Visiting the sick is a key component of what makes the Jewish people who we are – a compassionate and good-hearted people who look to better the world. Today, *bikur cholim* societies are part of the fabric of every Jewish community, and are almost universal. Similarly, schools and shuls are careful to carve time out of their regular programming so that their students and membership make visiting the sick a priority. Many families as well dedicate time to make a trip to the local hospitals or nursing homes to visit those in need. May all those involved in this great *mitzvah* be rewarded with good fortune, and may Hashem send a speedy recovery to all Cholei Yisrael.

Rabbi Moshe Walter is rav of Woodside Synagogue, Ahavas Torah in Silver Spring, Maryland and the Director of the Rabbinical Council of Greater Washington.

Reflections on the Mitzvah of Bikur Cholim

Rabbi Uri Topolosky

During the first car ride I ever shared with my holy wife-to-be, we encountered an ambulance whizzing past with its lights flashing. As we pulled to the side of the road, I noticed that Dahlia was chanting softly to herself in Hebrew: "*El Nah Refah Nah Lab*" - "Please God, heal her now."

Those words constitute one of the shortest recorded prayers in our tradition, uttered selflessly by Moshe on behalf of his sister. Our rabbis teach that Miriam was ill because she spoke slanderously about Moshe. Yet Moshe moved past his own feelings, and only wished for her well-being. This five-word plea appears at the end of *Parshat Beha'alotcha*, and captures the beauty of radical empathy.

Dahlia explained to me that when an ambulance approaches, sometimes, we focus on ourselves, perhaps irritated by the noise, or that we might be delayed in the resulting traffic. Instead, we should pause to pray for the person whom the ambulance is serving, and hope they find the healing they need. What began as her own personal practice, from a teaching she once heard by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, has now become our own family's meditative chant every time we see or hear a rushing ambulance.

I remember Rabbi Avi Weiss guiding rabbinical students with the principle that there are only the "sick," and the "not yet sick." We are one family, each of us equally vulnerable, and we need to expand our capacity for empathy in all circumstances.

This point was driven home for me early in my own rabbinate, when I found myself in the hospital awaiting knee surgery. A familiar face from our community saw me there, and asked, "Rabbi! Who are you here to visit?"

"Me!" I replied, thinking to myself, "Truly, there is only the sick, and the not yet sick."

Rabbi Uri Topolosky is rabbi of Kehilat Pardes in Rockville, Maryland and President of the Washington, D.C. Board of Rabbis.

Visiting the Sick: A Connection of Empathy

Erica Brown

Many years ago, a very kind and generous man told me that he hated visiting sick people. As he aged, such visits put him in uncomfortable contact with his own mortality. "I just can't do it."

There seems to be a reasonable solution. Call. Text. Skype.

Although technology's advances make communicating easier than ever before, they don't always do the trick when creating the deepest human bonds. Decades ago, a remarkable scholar, Rabbi Moses Feinstein (1895-1986), was asked whether or not calling a sick person via the telephone satisfied the mitzva requirement of visiting the sick (*Iggerot Moshe*, Y.D.I #223) After all, a call can bring cheer without the inconvenience of leaving the office or negotiating hospital parking. But Rav Moshe, as he was affectionately known, was unequivocal. The answer is no.

Rav Moshe's answer was based on his profound understanding of the mitzva of *bikur cholim*. He acknowledged instances where it may not be feasible or desirable to visit - if a person lives very far away or the sick person specifically requests no visitors out of embarrassment or discomfort. In either case, the phone offers a viable alternative.

But Rav Moshe was not letting us off the hook easily. For him, visiting the sick is not only to bring cheer and solace to the sick person; it also serves as a stimulus for the visitor to pray more intentionally on that person's behalf. Seeing another in a state of vulnerability induces greater compassion. The greater the compassion, the more the connection. The visual intake is critical in stirring us to take another step beyond the visit: to keep that person's suffering uppermost in our thoughts and prayers. Visiting the sick is *supposed* to put us in contact with mortality, helping us appreciate that our capacity for vulnerability is what makes us human.

Erica Brown is director of the Mayberg Center for Jewish Education and Leadership and an associate professor at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. She writes and speaks extensively on Jewish education and leadership.