



Bikur Cholim Shabbat, Parshat Vayera October 23, 2010

Dear Rabbi,

From shtetl to metropolis, throughout the ages, Rabbis and community members have partnered diligently in caring for the sick, fulfilling a fundamental tenet of Jewish tradition.

Did you know?

- Supporting someone during illness is documented to be helpful to healing.
- Simple listening skills can help make a visit more effective, and satisfying.
- We have 2 films on bikur cholim: an inspiring documentary and a training video that can be used to jump-start or increase bikur cholim awareness and participation.

3 ways your community can learn about the mitzvah:

1. **OBSERVE BIKUR CHOLIM SHABBAT THIS PARSHAT VAYERA, OCTOBER 23RD, 2010**
 - Speak about bikur cholim from the pulpit - thoughts on the mitzvah, its history, the Jewish perspective on seeking and receiving help, or on life cycle challenges such as coping with aging or illness.
 - Display the sample flyer (enclosed) on your synagogue bulletin board or newsletter.
 - Invite a speaker to discuss how bikur cholim has made a positive impact in their life, as one who visits or one who has been visited, or both.
 - Use inspirational texts, or view our films as a basis to start or recharge a group.
2. **COME TO THE 23RD ANNUAL CONFERENCE ON NOVEMBER 14TH, 2010 AT UJA-FEDERATION OF NY:**
 - Bring fellow congregants and friends and choose from a variety of workshops that will stimulate further discussion and action. Register at 212.632.4730 or download materials at www.bikurcholimcc.org. Co-sponsored by UJA-Federation of New York.
3. **ORDER A COPY OF THE BIKUR CHOLIM DOCUMENTARY "TURN TO ME" WITH COMPANION GUIDE:**
 - Produced and directed by Academy Award nominee Murray Nossel, and shown at the NJ Jewish Film Festival and the Sun Valley film festival and distributed nationally by CLAL. Order it online at www.bikurcholimcc.org. View it with your synagogue or as a community-wide event in partnership with other synagogues. Use this film to strengthen and nurture your caring community.

Best wishes,

Robin

Robin Schoenfeld, LMSW



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PLEASE POST

BIKUR CHOLIM* SHABBAT

**visiting the sick*

Parshat Vayera - October 23rd, 2010

"G-d appeared to him [Abraham] in the Plains of Mamre, while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day [recuperating from his circumcision]"

Genesis/Vayera 18:1

We dedicate *this* Shabbat to explore the teachings of bikur cholim and its benefits for the people we visit and for ourselves.

Make a visit. Make a difference!

We visit. We grow. We build. We make a difference.

Join us at the 23rd Annual Bikur Cholim Conference in NYC

Sunday, November 14th 2010

Co-sponsored with UJA-Federation of New York.

Together we create caring communities.

Visit our website for more information.

Rabbi Isaac N. Trainin Bikur Cholim Coordinating Council, JBFCs

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Sample Sermon 1



Who here has been to visit someone who was sick?

Who felt uncomfortable at some point?

Who did it because it was the “Jewish” thing to do?

Judaism commands us to visit the sick. And you might be thinking “Judaism commands me to do a lot of things – I don’t do all of them.” But this is one of those things we are commanded to do that makes us feel good in the process. One of the things I hear a lot from people who perform Bikur Cholim is that no matter how anxious they are when they go in, they almost always feel really good when they come out. They feel good about what they have done, but they also feel good because they have felt connected to another person.

In our society these days connecting with other people isn’t always so easy. My sister jokes that e-mail allows her to communicate with people without actually having to talk to them. So what do we do when we actually want to connect with people? And what about when those people are sick, or even dying? How do we connect then, and what do we do with all of our own feelings that might be stirred up?

The advantage of Judaism, of course, is that not only are we told that we should visit the sick, then we are given all sorts of examples of how and why. Some of those examples fit our lives today, some need to be adapted – but the guidance is there.

God, of course, is the ultimate role model. This week we read in Genesis 18:2 about God’s visit to Abraham after Abraham, at the age of 99, has circumcised himself – talk about a situation where you might not know what to say – and as

far as we are told - God says nothing – it is his presence that is the connection. We tell people in Bikur Cholim training that it is not what you say, but the fact that you have showed up that is most important.

Jewish tradition sees Bikur Cholim as a function of gemilut chesed, acts of kindness performed to follow the example of God's kindness and love. Really walking in God's path means imitating God's love and kindness through the crises of life, like illness. When we or those we care about are ill, we and they are at our most vulnerable. This is when we most look to God and Jewish tradition to tell us what to do, how to act. And talmudic teaching and Jewish tradition tell us.

I think that many people find that the greatest challenge in visiting is to focus on the person being visited – not on our own reactions. We have so many internal reactions to seeing someone who is ill: fear that this could happen to you, anxiety, or pity. These are natural feelings that many people experience. It can be hard to recognize and acknowledge our own feelings but then set them aside and focus on the needs of the ill person. In our nervousness we may chatter away, when the person really needs quiet and comfort. We may think about saying a prayer with or for the person and have no idea of how to start.

These are the sorts of issues that Bikur Cholim training addresses. But we need an opportunity to sit down apart from the crisis and think about how we want to respond to the crisis when it does happen. We need to think about the who, how, when and where and to practice what we might say or do.

In addition to talking about Bikur Cholim specifically, I want to give you some background. As some of you may be aware Jewish Healing Centers are being created/exist in many cities around the country. They are usually not physical spaces – they are more often a mix of services to provide support to people

who are struggling with illness and loss – the people who are sick and the people who care for and about them. So there may be Healing Services in synagogues, support groups in social service agencies, and Bikur Cholim programs run through synagogues or Federation agencies. In our community.....

This isn't about laying on of hands and healing people – it is about helping people cope with the illnesses they are struggling with, and using Jewish tradition to help them cope.

We are commanded to do Bikur Cholim. It can be an anxiety-provoking task or a warm, rewarding experience. I hope that the issues I have touched on tonight and the resources that are available will help make it a good experience.

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Sample Sermon 2

Bikur Cholim Sermon
Parashat Teruma Feb 9, 2007

When I first came to the community, maybe on the first or second Shabbat, two women approached me, welcomed me and then got right to their point – they said we want to do more bikur cholim in an organized way in the community, that is, they wanted help to do more visiting of people who are sick, recuperating or could become isolated. They also immediately gave me the name of someone whom they were visiting because she had had a fall because they wanted to make sure I also was aware of her situation

That was one of the moments that are the reason I love this job. The chance to work towards what is right and good, strengthened and energized by the dedication of others.

The Talmud shares some stories about how our sages dealt with their own illnesses and the incapacitation of their colleagues and I would like to share a few of those stories with you now.

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba fell ill and Rabbi Yochanan (his teacher) went in to visit him. He said to him, "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" Rabbi Hiyya said, "Neither they, nor their reward". Rabbi Yochanan said to him, "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand and he raised him -meaning he gave him some sort of healing.

Then Rabbi Yochanan himself fell ill and Rabbi Hanina (his teacher) went in to visit him. He asked him, "are your sufferings welcome to you?" he replied "neither they nor their reward." He said to him, "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand and he raised him.

The gemara continues, "Why couldn't Rabbi Yochanan raise himself? After all he had healed his student in the previous story! *They replied: The prisoner cannot free himself from jail.*

While the stories acknowledge the belief that there is reward for suffering, when the rabbis ask in the stories, "are these sufferings welcome to you?" they show that they don't find that kind of theology practically satisfying. The sages would rather not suffer! The stories say that **what is really powerful in a time of crisis is someone else reaching out**. No matter how powerful a person is, or how wise, **these stories suggest that someone else giving us their hand can comfort us in a way which philosophy often cannot**.

The story in the Talmud concluded with a metaphor of imprisonment – “a prisoner cannot free himself from jail.” The prison of the story is a place of isolation. When someone suffers from illness, bereavement or someone close to them does, the experience can be isolating because it divides starkly between those who are coping with the situation and the rest of the world. Practically, it is necessary to take time away from rest of one's life in order to be able to deal with the crisis or illness. That isolation can intensify as those around do not know the best way to react.

In these stories, the visiting sage gave some sort of healing to the one who was suffering. This symbolizes the power of solidarity - of visiting. It does not solve the crisis, but it can open a door, affirming no one is alone.

The Talmud in Nedarim tells us that one who visits a person who is ill removes a 60th of the person's pain.

What an opportunity, what power and what responsibility we have for each other, to act when we are able, to use our power to help when we can.

A few weeks ago people of Shearith Israel came together to learn what the congregation has been doing this year to make it a more interconnected and supportive place, and to share ideas and plans for the next half of the year. I opened the meeting, which took place during the week of Parashat Yitro, with an observation from that parasha which I would like to tie in here.

Moses, the greatest leader of our people, a powerful personality who had come as close as any person ever has to experiencing and knowing God, was also the messenger and representative of God who adjudicated all matters that came up among the nation in the desert. The torah says

יג וישב משה לשפוט את העם ויעמוד העם על משה מן הבקר עד הערב :

“Moses sat to judge the people and they stood before Moses from morning to evening.”

The Torah continues -

יד וירא חתן משה את כל אשר הוא עשה לעם ויאמר מה הדבר הזה אשר אתה עשה לעם מדוע אתה יושב לבדך וכל העם נצב עליך מן בקר עד ערב:

“And Moses' father in law saw all he was doing and asked him, “what are you doing with the people, Why do you sit all alone?”

מדוע אתה יושב לבדך

ויאמר משה לחתנו כי יבא אלי העם לדרש אלהים:

Moses essentially answered, do I have any choice? "The people come to me to seek answers from God!"

And Yitro told Moses, You don't have to do this alone. Even Moses, our greatest teacher, needed someone from outside his space, outside his experience to reach out to him and release him from what he thought was the way things had to be. Yitro pointed out to him that he did not have to sit all alone bearing all the weight on his own. There were people who could help him. And he responded to this by creating a system of judges to shoulder some of his burden.

Now we have seen several examples of a caring person who is concerned about someone else, entering that person's life to offer themselves and to affirm that difficulties and burdens should not be borne alone.

But what motivates this kind of action - reaching out to another? I would like to explore three different ways to think about gestures of caring and solidarity with another person, each one increasingly profound.

These are:

- 1) personal experience and responsibility
- 2) imitating God
- 3) encountering God

We begin with the power of our personal experience and needs.

Rambam discusses the mitzvah of bikur cholim, (visiting a person who is ill) and gives us an interesting understanding of its meaning.

He writes:

מצות עשה של דבריהם לבקר חולים, ולנחם אבלים, ולהוציא המת, ולהכניס הכלה, וללוות האורחים, ולהתעסק בכל צרכי הקבורה, לשאת על הכתף, ולילך לפניו ולספוד ולהפור 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 לאחריך בתורה ובמצות.

"It is a positive rabbinic commandment to visit the sick, and to comfort mourners, and to help make a wedding for a bride and to accompany guests and to attend to all the needs of a burial and to entertain a bride and groom and to provide for their needs. These are acts of loving kindness which in themselves have no limit and even though all are rabbinic commandments, they are included in the torah commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," meaning anything which you would want others to do for you, you should do them for your fellow in Torah and mitzvot."

Interestingly, Hillel's summary of the entire torah in Tractate Shabbat seems to re-formulate the meaning of the verse, "You should love your neighbor as yourself" *in a minimal way* – "What you find hateful, do not do to someone else." Hillel encourages us to reflect on our difficult experiences, "what is hateful to us" and act in a way which does not repeat it.

Rambam, by contrast, appeals to our own experience and self-interest, but *in a maximal way*. He says:

Things which you can imagine, or know from experience you would want others to do for you, you should do for other people. This is what animates our care for others.

For Rambam, the motivation for reaching out to others comes from our mutual dependence and interconnectedness. There will come a time when we are the person beginning a new life with a partner, or have started a family, or when we or someone close to us is sick.

We identify with the intensity of these moments, we remember our own stories, and we affirm the ability of the community to lighten the load and to amplify joy. We must, says Rambam, act every day in order to foster a community that is constantly responsive to the struggles and experiences of its members.

The Shulchan Aruch, the 16th century code of Jewish law written by Rabbi Yosef Karo, in the discussion of the mitzva of bikur cholim, (visiting someone who is ill) states that one should pray for the person who is ill.

יכול אותו בתוך חולי ישראל, שיאמר: המקום ירחם עליך בתוך חולי ישראל ובשבת אומר: שבת היא מלזעוק, ורפואה קרובה לבא.

He writes:

"When you pray for a person, you must include him or her among the other Jewish people who are ill, and say "May the omnipresent be merciful to you among those who are ill of Israel." On Shabbat one should say "We refrain from crying out, but healing is close at hand."

Meaning when you pray for a full and speedy recovery, you should think about the person before you together with the rest of those who are ill among our people. We incorporate our neighbor and ourselves into the larger community.

This formulation indicates that visiting or supporting a person in difficult times is a way of joining ourselves together as a community to strengthen each other. In our regular prayers we speak in the plural, and especially when praying for a person who is sick the Shulchan Aruch says we must pray for an individual as

part of a larger community, connecting us and our fates to each other even as we focus on the individual struggles of one person. This is the first level, the power of personal experience to stimulate action.

The second level I want to discuss is seeing Bikur cholim and other examples of acts of loving kindness as imitating or emulating God.

The verse in Devarim tells us:

אחרי יקוק אלהיכם תלכו ואתו תיראו ואת מצותיו תשמרו ובקלו תשמעו ואתו תעבדו ובו תדבקון

“You shall walk after the Lord your God and it is God whom you should fear, observe His commandments and listen to His voice. It is God whom you shall serve and to Him you should cleave”

Rashi, our great eleventh century commentator explains the phrase “cleave to God,”

ובו תדבקון - הדבק בדרכיו. גמול חסדים, קבור מתים בקר חולים
כמו שעשה הקב"ה:

“Cleave to God means cleave (stick) to His ways. Do acts of kindness, bury the dead, visit the sick, just as the Holy One did.”

When Rashi says that God visited the sick and buries the dead, he is referring to an ancient midrash tradition, which is cited in the Talmud Sotah.

אחרי ה' אלהיכם תלכו? וכי אפשר לו לאדם להלך אחר שכינה? והלא כבר נאמר: [דברים ד](#) + כי ה' אלהיך אש אוכלת הוא

The Talmud asks, ‘what does it mean to walk after God?’ Can a person follow in the steps of the divine presence? After all it says in the Torah, that the Lord your God is a consuming fire!

[אלא](#) להלך אחר מדותיו של הקב"ה

Rather it means walk in the attributes of God,

, מה הוא מלביש ערומים, דכתיב: [בראשית ג](#) + ויעש ה' אלהים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבישם, אף אתה הלבש ערומים;

Just as God clothes the naked, as it says, God made for Adam and his wife clothes of skin and he clothed them, so you too clothe the naked.

הקב"ה ביקר חולים, דכתיב: [בראשית יח](#) + וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא, אף אתה בקר חולים

The Holy One visits the sick, as it says, “and he appeared to him (Abraham) at elonei mamre” which was when Abraham was recuperating from his circumcision and the torah tells us he was in great pain. So too, you visit the sick.

הקב"ה ניחם אבלים, דכתיב: [בראשית כה](#) + ויהי אחרי מות אברהם ויברך אלהים את יצחק בנו, אף אתה נחם אבלים

The Holy one comforts mourners, as it says, “after the death of Abraham, the Lord blessed Isaac” So too, you comfort mourners.

הקב"ה קבר מתים, דכתיב: [דברים לד](#) + ויקבר אותו בגיא, אף אתה קבור מתים

The holy one buries the dead. As it says, he buried him in the valley. So too you bury the dead.”

The Talmud I just quoted teaches us that doing these mitzvot which are so practical, so human, they are a way of being Godly.

Our tradition teaches us that we bring holiness into this world and draw closer to God by caring for God's creatures as God does. Spiritual moments, then, are not only when we learn God's torah or pray or contemplate, they are when **we emulate qualities attributed to the Divine.**

And finally, the third level. Reaching out to someone else is not only a way of emulating Divinity and thereby reaching towards it. Our tradition tells us that visiting someone who is having a hard time is an opportunity for an **encounter with the Divine.**

The Talmud in Nedarim teaches us that:

“Rabin said in Rab's name: From where do we know that the Almighty sustains the sick? From the verse, “The Lord will strengthen him on the sickbed.” Rabin also said in Rab's name: From where do we know that the Divine Presence rests above an invalid's bed? From the verse, “The Lord sets himself upon the sickbed.” It was taught similarly: One who visits the sick must not sit upon the bed, or on a stool or a chair, but must [reverently] robe oneself and sit upon the ground, because the Divine Presence rests above a sick person's bed, as it is written, “The Lord sets himself upon the bed of sickness.”

The Talmud interprets a biblical verse to teach that when a person is in pain, or is ill, God is very close to them and gives them special attention. Therefore, if another person comes to visit them, they are also in the presence of God in a more immediate way than in ordinary life. Coming to visit is acting not only as God's emissary, but is also an encounter with God.

At the bikur holim conference which ten community members, our Program Director and I attended in November, Rabbi Yitz Greenberg said that reaching out to a person who is ill or to their family or caregiver is a profound gesture. It says "I honor the uniqueness of you as an individual, and how precious you are – there is no one exactly like you in the whole world."

It is another way of saying, "I acknowledge you as created in the image of God, be'tselem elokim." Just as there is nothing like God, God is absolutely singular, so too each person has their own stamp, their own singularity.

Just as God is infinite, each person has infinite worth.
We are affirming and encountering the other's *tselem elokim*

Coming back to how I began, with our community, in the six months I have been with you, I have seen amazing efforts in the community to put these ideals into practice.

- 1) People have visited others,
- 2) We have started a meal program which allows the community to send food to families and individuals as a gesture of support in challenging times.
- 3) With help from a newly established hesed fund, we have subsidized these meals
- 4) As well as enabled people who have become more isolated from our community to attend services and dinners here.
- 5) We created a way of organizing ourselves and facilitating our community members to both offer their help and look for support through Caring Connection
- 6) We have just begun a telephone visiting partnership program which you will all receive information about very soon so you can get involved.

We all have a vision of our community a protective and warm place, where we are connected not only at lifecycle events or when we pray together or eat together, but especially **when we need each other.**

At those moments, instead of feeling unable to help and edging away, we want to reach out together and say, "You are part of us and we are here!"

Thank you for inspiring me in your dedication.

Let's keep going.

Shabbat shalom.