

National Tragedies and Individual Suffering

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VISITING THE SICK: RESTORING THE BERACHAH OF “HAMAKOM” TO ITS PROPER “PLACE”

There was a wealthy and miserly Jew to whose house a poor man came, looking for a morsel of food to sustain himself. The miser refused to give food to the beggar, but after repeated pleas, the miser dug into his garbage and pulled out a piece of old, rotten fish, which the beggar devoured. Late that afternoon, the beggar became sick and was rushed to the hospital. At the evening service, the miser heard

about the hospitalization and told his wife that he had to visit the poor beggar since *bikur cholim*, visiting the sick, is such an important mitzvah. The next morning in the synagogue, the miser heard that the beggar had died, and he told his wife that he had to attend the funeral, since *levayat hamait* — escorting the deceased to a final resting place — is also a very great mitzvah. That afternoon, the miser learned that the beggar’s son

was sitting shivah, and he told his wife smilingly that he had to visit the son and perform the mitzvah of *nichum avaylim* — comforting the mourners. His wife asked why he was in a good mood, and the miser responded that he was joyful that with one lousy piece of fish, he was able to fulfill four essential commandments: *hachnosat orchim* — feeding a hungry guest, visiting the sick, attending a funeral, and comforting a mourner.

I am honored to dedicate this Tisha B’Av issue of *Torah To Go* in memory of my dear and revered parents, *zichronam livrachah*, whose professional rabbinic and rebbitzin roles were but a reflection of their personal commitments to care for and pray for the sick as well as comfort those in mourning. If I have mastered any of the caring skills expected of a rabbi/chaplain, it is due to their example and teachings. In this season of mourning, may we all merit to again hear the clarion call of the Almighty, no longer hidden from us — “*Nachamu, Nachamu Ami*” — may we all be comforted with the imminent coming of the Messiah and a world where all people will be at peace, “*Uva leTzion Goel*” — and may the Redeemer come speedily to Zion, Amen.

In a Talmudic passage (*Shabbat* 127a), we are taught a lesson so essential that it is incorporated into the daily morning prayers. *Bikur cholim* — and the other mitzvot mentioned above — constitute a very small number of good deeds whose performance guarantees a just reward in this world and undiminished returns in the world to come.

Properly, as the Rambam (*Hilchot De'ot*, 3:3) writes, we should lead a healthy lifestyle and take care of ourselves so that we are well and able to serve Hashem in a wholesome manner. Those who follow the Divine commandments and are righteous will be spared from illness (Ex. 15:26).

However, perfection in life is rare, and while we don't understand the ways of God, sometimes sickness comes to help us change our ways and repent. At other times, as with Avraham, sickness can be a natural process of healing, such as following a prescribed circumcision. The fact that the Torah (Ex. 21:19) permits a trained doctor to heal others, though the sickness itself has Divine origins, is proof of the dictum that we should always strive to seek out the best treatments to improve our life spiritually and physically, while believing in God as the arbiter of life and death.

Besides the medical care from a professional that may be rendered to the sick, our tradition recognizes the very special healing power that can come from family, friends, and even strangers who ask about our health, and who desire to provide assistance; thus *bikur cholim* becomes a major religious

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paragon and activity. Just as God visited Avraham when he was ailing after his circumcision to comfort him, so too should we emulate the Almighty and visit those who are ill (*Sotah* 14a), as we are instructed in the Torah, “After the Lord your God shall you follow and emulate” (Deut. 13:5). Interestingly, it is a suggestion by the non-Jew Yitro, when he came to the Israelite encampment to visit his son-in-law, Moshe, and said to him: “...and you shall tell them [the Israelites] the way that they should go” (Ex. 18:20), which has found its way into the codification of Jewish Law. Our Rabbis (*Bava Metzia* 30b) have said that this phrase, “that they should go,” specifically teaches the mitzvah of *bikur cholim*. The Maharsha explains that the key fulfillment of *bikur cholim* is predicated upon “going” — going to visit the sick and allowing our mere presence to serve as a source of healing and inspiration.

The Code of Jewish Law, the *Shulchan Aruch* in *Yoreh De’ah* 335, teaches in detail how we should ideally visit in the following 10 paragraphs:

1. Relatives and friends (whose presence may bring immediate consolation) should visit quickly upon notification of illness; those who are more distant, after three days.
2. Stature makes no difference — the great should visit those who are young or small, even many times during the day, as needed, as long as the visitor is not bothering, burdening, or inconveniencing the sick. The Maharil says that an enemy should visit a sick person, but the Rema disagrees, feeling that such a visit could bring much discomfort to an ill person.
3. A visitor should not stand over a sick person but rather sit alongside, out of respect for the Shechinah, the

Divine presence that uniquely hovers over a sick person.

The common denominator of these laws is that merely “by going,” our caring presence and visit to the sick, when possible and permissible, is most efficacious and desirable, together with heartfelt prayer to the Almighty that His merciful healing be sent to the ill one.

4. Halachah is very mindful of the need for a sick person not to feel embarrassed or inconvenienced, so generally, we should not visit during the first three hours of day, when treatments may be administered and the sick one is thereby feeling a little better at that time, because a visitor might think that there was so much improvement that we need not pray for the sick. We should generally also not visit during the last three hours of the day, when a sick person may be in tremendous pain, and a visitor might feel that prayer would not be effective. Ultimately, we do not fulfill the mitzvah of *bikur cholim* if we do not

recite a prayer asking for a merciful recovery.

5. When praying in the presence of a sick person, we may pray in any language so that the patient will understand and be appreciative, but if praying away from the sick one, we should recite the prayer in the Holy Language — Hebrew.
6. We should not just pray for a specific person alone, but should also include in the prayer the hope for healing for all who are sick among the Israelites, and say: “May Hamakom, the One who is in every place, be merciful to you among the sick in Israel.” On Shabbat we should say, “On Shabbat it is not permitted to cry in pain, and therefore may a quick recovery come.”
7. We might suggest to a sick person that he or she might feel less burdened if loans were repaid or if property might be restored, without any fear of death — so that a sick person can feel strengthened to properly attend to personal affairs.
8. We should not visit those with severe internal, psychological, neurological or ophthalmic diseases or other such difficult health issues when it will be laborious for them to talk or communicate, unless we know for sure that the visit will be appreciated and helpful. Rather, it may be preferable to visit their home or nursing station and inquire how we can be helpful to them in terms of cleaning or the like; and when hearing about these challenging cases, we should be moved to want to pray that God’s mercy be upon them.
9. We should visit non-Jewish sick people, too — “*mipnei darchei shalom*” — because such visits will engender and foster peaceful relationships in the world.

10. With internal illnesses where care is more intimate or sensitive, for modesty purposes, it is best that a male not treat a female, although a female could care for a male.

The Rema adds: Some suggest that a sick person's relative approach the local rabbi or Torah scholar and ask that person, who has attained a lofty spiritual level, to pray for and seek Divine assistance in sending a merciful healing to the sick. It is also customary to recite a prayer for the sick during the Torah reading in the synagogue, and even to add a new name in very serious situations, because a name change may help avert an evil decree upon the sick one with just the original name.

Finally, the Rema quotes the teaching that for a person who has time to do only one mitzvah, it is preferable that priority be given to visiting a grieving mourner during shivah instead of visiting the sick because in the former case, we are paying respects and honoring not just the living but also the deceased.

The common denominator of these laws is that merely “by going,” our caring presence and visit to the sick, when possible and permissible, is most efficacious and desirable, together with heartfelt prayer to the Almighty that His merciful healing be sent to the ill one. When visiting, we should be sensitive to the needs and state of mind of the sick, and not extend a visit too long to the point that it becomes a burden. We should inquire how we might be helpful in running errands or doing some other meaningful activity, and the topics of conversation should be uplifting. Therefore, it is best to not talk about the sickness or deaths of others if that could depress the sick one.

The Rema's concluding words discussing the relationship between visiting the sick and comforting mourners deserves our attention. We began by stating that *bikur cholim* is one of a small number of good deeds “whose performance guarantees a just reward in this world, and undiminished returns in the world to come.” This list does not include comforting mourners. On the other hand, comforting mourners does take precedence over visiting the sick.

The codification in the *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah* of the chapter dealing with the laws of *bikur cholim* appropriately and chronologically precedes the chapters dealing with death and mourning. In the Rambam, his order of these laws is more puzzling. Rambam has no chapter dedicated to *bikur cholim*. Rather, he has a 14-chapter section called *Hilchot Avel*, the laws of mourning. Only in the 14th and final chapter, after dealing with all aspects of death, does the Rambam introduce the importance of *bikur cholim* in its first halachic paragraph:

מצות עשה של דבריהם לבקר חולים ולנחם אבלים ולהוציא המת ולהכניס הכלה וללוות האורחים ולהתעסק בכל צרכי הקבורה ... וכן לשמח הכלה והחתן ולסעודם בכל צרכיהם ואלו הן גמילות חסדים שבגופו שאין להם שיעור אף על פי 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 commandment instituted by the Rabbis to visit the sick, and comfort the mourners, and prepare a dead body for burial, and fete and honor a bride, and accompany visitors as they are leaving, and be involved in all aspects of burial ... and rejoice before a bride and groom and care for all of their needs, since all of these commandments

are truly personally performed acts of “gemilut chasadim” — extending many kindnesses — which have no limit ... and they are all manifestations of the Biblical teaching that “One should love one's friend/neighbor as oneself ...” (Lev. 19:18).

In paragraphs 2 and 3 of Chapter 14, the Rambam discusses how the mitzvah of accompanying a visitor is properly accomplished — in contrast to our opening story! Only in paragraphs 4 through 6 does the Rambam discuss the details of *bikur cholim*. Paragraph 7 concludes with the teaching that the Rema will later repeat, “It appears to me that comforting the mourners takes precedence over visiting the sick, because comforting the mourners pays tribute to and is concerned with kindnesses shown to both the living and the dead.” Chapter 14 thereafter continues and concludes with laws concerning the deceased and mourners.

We see that the Rambam codifies these laws of *gemilut chasadim* not in a chronological manner, but rather by their spiritual and cosmic impact and effect where “comforting the mourners” — *nichum avaylim* — takes precedence.

There is another area where *bikur cholim* and *nichum avaylim* share a unique similarity that has not been extensively discussed. In the laws in *Yoreh De'ah* 335:6 cited above, the *Shulchan Aruch* quotes the Talmud (*Shabbat* 12b) that we should bless the sick with a blessing that addresses God as Hamakom:

המקום ירחם עליך בתוך חולי ישראל.
May Hamakom, the One Who is in every place, be merciful to you among the sick in Israel.

Interestingly, this blessing is not frequently recited, especially since we may pray in any language.

By contrast, the blessing of comfort extended to mourners — המקום ינחם אתכם בתוך שאר אבלי ציון וירושלים — May Hamakom, the One Who is in every place, comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem — is almost universally used among Ashkenazic Jews, and yet this text is not found in the Talmud or *Shulchan Aruch*. The *Gesher Hachaim* just says that it is a “traditional blessing.” The *Alay Tamar* on *Moed Katan*, chapter 1, mentions that our current text emerged around the Middle Ages as a replacement for the traditional blessings for mourners said in a special Grace after Meals which fell into desuetude. [I thank Rav Aharon Kahn for this source.]

The Talmud in *Berachot* 16b mentions another berachah that also includes the unusual appellation of God as “Hamakom,” which is recited when a person suffers the significant loss of a servant or animal: *Hamakom yemalay lecha chesroncha* — May Hamakom replace your loss.

Additionally, in the “*Achaynu Kol Bait Yisrael*” prayer recited after the Torah reading on Mondays and Thursdays, remembering those who are in distress and captivity, we address God with the same formula that is used for a sick person: “*Hamakom yerachem alay’hem*” — May Hamakom have mercy on them.

Why is this Divine name, “Hamakom,” only used in these blessings where there is some sort of loss or hurt? In the Passover Haggadah, *An Exalted Evening* (p. 45), featuring the teachings of Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik and edited by Rabbi Menachem Genack, there is

an explanation by Rav Soloveitchik offered in connection with the phrase in the Haggadah where God is addressed as “Baruch Hamakom, Baruch Hu”:

The appellation of ha-Makom, “the Place,” refers to God when He retreats and seems distant, at times of travail, trauma, and tragedy. Yet even when He recedes to His Place, nonetheless, from a distance ha-Makom appears to us. When God relates to us from a distance we refer to him as ha-Makom. Therefore, when we console the mourners, we use the appellation ha-Makom, and we say, “Ha-Makom yenachem etkhem ...”

With this explanation, the use of Hamakom in the prayer for the sick seems so appropriate (as it does for one who loses a servant or animal or for one in captivity). During an illness, we feel a sense of separation from and perhaps even abandonment by God. Ironically, even though we believe that God is imminently present where the sick person is, and His presence hovers over the sick bed, we still feel separated from that Divine Presence due to the spiritual and physical manifestation of sickness, and we sense isolation from God in our lack of wholesome completeness.

At the same time, perhaps this is why many no longer use this formula for the sick. We do not want to emphasize this distancing from God and would rather concentrate on a healing that will bring the sick person closer to the Almighty once again. Another reason might be that since it is easy to confuse the word “*yerachem*” — have mercy, addressed to a sick person, with the word “*yenachem*” — be consoled, addressed to a mourner, we want to make sure that we accidentally do not address

one who is sick with the term that indicates the presence of death.

When we are careful with our prayers and utterances and give them proper thought, the blessing of “Hamakom yerachem ...” extended to a sick person seems so appropriate. Indeed, in the *Siddur Yesod Malchut*, this prayer is listed as the climactic prayer to be shared with one who is sick:

המקום ירחם עליך בתוך [כל] חולי ישראל.
May Hamakom be merciful to you among [all] the sick in Israel.

May healing quickly come to those who are ill so that we need not recite this berachah often, Amen.

As a postscript, the various times mentioned above in the *Shulchan Aruch* for visitation applied primarily to an era when most sick people remained at home, with no full-time trained care-givers. In our day, when so many of our sick are in hospitals or the like with 24/7 professional care, visitation times could be different and should be guided by present medical needs and the patient’s desires.

It is amazing how the thrust of these halachot for the sick seem to be built into the training that most Board Certified Chaplains receive when taking required Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) units. The halachic concerns about the appropriate time and length of pastoral visits, and the guidance that visitors should let the sick person guide the conversation in a manner that would be most beneficial to the patient, and the expressed desire to offer to recite a prayer for those in need of healing, are all standard chaplain practices.