

Visiting the Sick

ביקור חולים

On the surface, the mitzvah to visit the sick, *bikur cholim*, seems to be a self-evident moral obligation to help someone in need – a sick person might need help, or visitors to cheer him up – and that there is not much more to say about it.

However, a more detailed look at the mitzvah of *bikur cholim* will demonstrate that this is one of the noblest activities that man can engage in, whereby he emulates God Himself, as well as fulfilling the mitzvah of loving one's fellow Jew. Visiting the sick entails much more than just taking care of a patient's physical needs. Essential components to this mitzvah are to sensitize oneself to help ease the emotional distress of the patient and pray for his well-being.

Every mitzvah in the Torah is specifically designed to educate us regarding higher levels of awareness and sensitivity, and to give us new horizons in our spiritual growth. Visiting the sick is no different.

This session will address the following questions:

- **What is the basic source of the mitzvah to visit the sick?**
- **How important is the mitzvah of visiting the sick?**
- **How exactly does one fulfill this mitzvah?**
- **What are the objectives of one who sets out to visit a sick person?**
- **What is the unique relationship between prayer and *bikur cholim*?**

1 – BASIC SOURCES: WRITTEN & ORAL TORAH

Source 1. Devarim 13:5 – God calls on man to walk in His ways

After the Lord your God, shall you follow, and Him shall you fear. Keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cleave to Him.	אַחֲרֵי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם תֵּלְכוּ וְאֵתוֹ תִירְאוּ וְאֵת מִצְוֹתָיו תִּשְׁמְרוּ וּבְקִלּוֹ תִשְׁמְעוּ וְאֵתוֹ תַעֲבֹדוּ וְבוֹ תִדְבָּקוּן:
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There is a Torah mitzvah to “follow after God.” What does this mean; how is it possible to do this?

Source 2. Sotah 14a – Emulating the ways of God

<p>Rabbi Chama, son of Rabbi Chanina, says: What is the meaning of that which is written: “<i>After the Lord your God shall you walk</i>” (Deuteronomy 13:5), is it actually possible for a person to follow the Divine Presence? Hasn’t it already been stated: “<i>For the Lord your God is a devouring fire</i>” (Deuteronomy 4:24), [and one cannot approach fire!]</p> <p>Rather, the meaning is that one should follow the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed be He: Just as He clothes the naked, as it is written: “<i>And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin, and clothed them</i>” (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] “<i>And the Lord appeared unto him by the plains of Mamre</i>” (Genesis 18:1), so too, should you visit the sick; Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, consoles mourners, as it is written: “<i>And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son</i>” (Genesis 25:11), so too, should you console mourners; Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, buried the dead, as it is written: “<i>And He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab</i>” (Deuteronomy 34:6), so too, should you bury the dead.</p>	<p>אמר רבי חמא בר חנינא מאי דכתיב אחרי ה' אלקיכם תלכו וכי אפשר לו לאדם להלך אחר שכינה? והלא כבר נאמר (דברים ד, כד) כי ה' אלהיך אש אוכלה הוא</p> <p>אלא להלך אחר מדותיו של הקב"ה מה הוא מלביש ערומים דכתיב (בראשית ג, כא) ויעש ה' אלהים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבישם אף אתה הלבש ערומים הקב"ה ביקר חולים דכתיב (בראשית יח, א) וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא אף אתה בקר חולים הקב"ה ניחם אבלים דכתיב (בראשית כה, יא) ויהי אחרי מות אברהם ויברך אלהים את יצחק בנו אף אתה נחם אבלים הקב"ה קבר מתים דכתיב (דברים לד, ו) ויקבר אותו בגיא אף אתה קבור מתים</p>
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At the most basic level, one’s mere presence in the room or at the bedside of the sick person is a fulfillment of the mitzvah of Bikur Cholim. For what did God do when he came to visit Avraham who was weak and recovering? He simply “appeared to him”, and therefore the minimum requirement for this mitzvah is to simply ‘show up’.¹

This basic idea is affirmed by the following source:

¹ Maharal, Gur Aryeh, on Bereishis 18:1, as elaborated by Rabbi Yitzchok Berkovitz *shlita*

Source 3. Talmud Bavli, Bava Metzia 30b – Sharing the Burden of 1/60th

<p>Rav Yosef taught in a <i>baraisa</i> [with regard to the verse: “<i>And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and shall show them the path wherein they shall walk and the action that they must perform</i>” (Exodus 18:20)]. “<i>And you shall teach them,</i>” that is referring to the structure of their livelihood, (i.e., teach the Jewish people trades so that they may earn a living); “<i>the path,</i>” that is referring to acts of kindness; “<i>they shall walk,</i>” that is referring to visiting the ill; “<i>wherein,</i>” that is referring to burial; “<i>and the action,</i>” that is referring to acting in accordance with the letter of the law; “<i>that they must perform,</i>” that is referring to acting beyond the letter of the law.</p>	<p>דתני רב יוסף (שמות יח, כ) "והודעת להם" זה בית חיייהם "את הדרך" זו גמילות חסדים "אשר ילכו" זה ביקור חולים "בה" זו קבורה "ואת המעשה" זה הדין "אשר יעשון" זו לפני משורת הדין:</p>
<p>(The Gemara questions that which was taught with regard to the phrase “<i>they shall walk,</i>” that is referring to visiting the ill) The Gemara asks: That is included in acts of kindness!!</p>	<p>אמר רב יוסף ילכו זה ביקור חולים היינו גמילות חסדים</p>
<p>(The Gemara answers): The reference to visiting the ill is necessary only for the contemporary of the ill person, as the Master said: When one who is a contemporary of an ill person visits him, he takes one-sixtieth of his illness. Since visiting an ill contemporary involves contracting a bit of his illness, a special derivation is necessary to teach that even so, he is required to go and visit him.</p>	<p>לא נצרכה אלא לבן גילו דאמר רב בן גילו נוטל אחד מששים בחליו ואפי' הכי מבעי ליה למיזל לגביה</p>

What does “taking 1/60th” mean exactly?? The Maharal explains at the most simple level:

Source 4. Maharal, Chidushei Agadot, ibid. – Visitors help the patient feel he is a part of normal reality, and this alleviates his suffering.

<p>A sick person is effectively separated from other people [and from the rest of reality]. Reality as a whole is functioning as it should, whereas a sick person has diverged from this state of normal functioning. When healthy people visit the sick person and connect with him, they restore him, if only somewhat, to a state of health and normalcy, thus “alleviating a sixtieth of the malady.” Therefore, specifically when the visitor is a contemporary of the patient [will one sixtieth of his suffering be removed] since he has more of a connection with the visitor.</p>	<p>החולי הוא נבדל מן כלל הבריות כאשר הוא חולה, כי כלל הנבראים הם כאשר הם ראויים להיות, אבל החולי אשר יצא מבריות הוא נבדל מן הכלל. ובזה שמבקרים החולה והם מתחברים ומצטרפים אליו הנבראים, ובזה נוטל את חליו ממנו אחד מס', ולפיכך דוקא כאשר הוא בן גילו כי יש לו חיבור עמו ...</p>
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Simply ‘showing up’ can have an obvious but powerful effect: it re-connects the ill-person with society, thereby restoring his sense of normalcy.

*As with **all** of the other mitzvohs of the Torah, though, when we examine some of the other sources in the Talmud that deal with Bikur Cholim, we'll find that there's **much** more to the picture...*

2 – CARE & PRAYER

Source 5. Talmud Bavli, Nedarim 39b-40a – Visiting the sick has the power to restore a person's health and potentially save his life.

Rav Chalbo fell sick. Rav Kahana went and announced: "Rav Chalbo is sick!" No one came to visit. Rav Kahana said, "Didn't the following incident happen [that teaches the importance of visiting the sick]? Once, one of Rabbi Akiva's disciples fell sick. The Sages did not come to visit, until Rabbi Akiva himself came. Due to the fact that he swept and mopped the room, the patient lived. He then said to Rabbi Akiva, 'My master, you have given me life!' [Following this incident] Rabbi Akiva went out and taught: 'Whoever does not visit the sick, it is as if he has spilled blood!'"

When Rav Dimi came [from Eretz Yisrael to Babylonia] he said: Anyone who visits the ill causes that he will live, and anyone who does not visit the ill causes that he will die. (The Gemara asks): 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. Therefore, since he might have saved the sick person with prayers had he visited, his failure to visit is tantamount to causing his death.

...Rav Sheisha, son of Rav Idi, said: One should 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. 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]. In the last three hours of the day his weakness is exacerbated, [and the visitor will despair of ameliorating his suffering and will conclude that prayer is futile]

רב חלבו חלש נפק רב כהנא אכריז רב חלבו באיש לא איכא דקא אתי. אמר להו "לא כך היה מעשה בתלמיד אחד מתלמידי רבי עקיבא שחלה, לא נכנסו חכמים לבקרו, ונכנס רבי עקיבא לבקרו ובשביל שכיבדו וריבצו לפניו חיה. אמר ליה: 'רבי החייתני.' יצא רבי עקיבא ודרש 'כל מי שאינו מבקר חולים כאילו שופך דמים!'"

כי אתא רב דימי אמר כל המבקר את החולה גורם לו שיחיה וכל שאינו מבקר את החולה גורם לו שימות מאי גרמא אילימא כל המבקר את החולה מבקש עליו רחמים שיחיה וכל שאין מבקר את החולה מבקש עליו רחמים שימות שימות ס"ד אלא כל שאין מבקר חולה אין מבקש עליו רחמים לא שיחיה ולא שימות

... אמר רב שישא בריה דרב אידי לא ליסעוד איניש קצירא לא בתלת שעי קדמייתא ולא בתלת שעי בתרייתא דיומא כי היכי דלא ליסח דעתיה מן רחמי תלת שעי קדמייתא רווחא דעתיה בתרייתא תקיף חולשיה

Some additional elements of *bikur cholim* emerge from this Gemara. The great medieval commentator, Nachmonides ("Ramban"), elaborates:

Source 6. Ramban, Torat HaAdam, Sha'ar HaMeichush

<p>We learn from here that we visit the sick in order to sweep and mop the floor and take care of all of the needs pertaining to his illness, and to improve the patient's mood and provide peace of mind by having friendly company. Moreover, to put oneself in the position where one is aroused to pray on the patient's behalf, similar to what the Torah teaches us regarding one who is afflicted with <i>tzaras</i>²: "<i>Impure! Impure! He shall call out</i>" – which teaches us that the afflicted individual must publicize his sickness, so that others will pray for his recovery. Therefore, if one visits a sick person and does not pray on his behalf, one has not fulfilled the mitzvah.</p>	<p>ושמעין מהכא דבקור חולים כדי שיכבדו וירביצו לפניו, ויעשו לו הצרכים הצריכים לחליו וימצא נחת רוח עם חבריו. ועוד כדי שיכוין דעתו לרחמים ויבקש עליו כדתניא (מ"ק ה.) "וטמא טמא יקרא" צריך להודיע צערו לרבים ורבים מבקשים עליו רחמים. הלכך ביקר את החולה ולא ביקש עליו רחמים לא קיים המצוה.</p>
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Based on the Gemara, the Ramban clearly delineates 2 additional aspect of *Bikur Cholim*:

1. Taking care of his physical needs³
2. Praying for his welfare⁴

The first element, taking care of the physical needs, is easily understood: to the degree to which we can make actual efforts to improve their situation, we most certainly should do so. Additionally, we could appreciate that prayer could be an effective ingredient in the ill-person's recovery – after all, there's a limit to how much *we* (doctors included!) can do, and much is simply left in the hands of Divine Mercy.

What is interesting to note, though, is, as the Ramban says, that prayer is an intrinsic element of the mitzvah of *Bikur Cholim*, and, that "if one visits a sick person and does not pray on his behalf, one has not fulfilled the mitzvah!" What is the intrinsic relationship between Bikur Cholim and prayer??

² The physical disease which one is afflicted with as a result of speaking Loshon Hara.

³ "Sweeping and mopping" are not literal, but rather examples cited by the Gemara [Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 335:1, 2]. Other examples may include: Calling a doctor, obtaining medicine, shopping or cleaning his house if needed, bringing him food, making phone calls on his behalf, etc...

⁴ The halachic authorities explain that the Gemara's statement that one should not visit during the first and last 3-hours of the day is not a steadfast rule, but, rather, strong advice: since one of the primary objectives of *Bikur Cholim* is to arouse one's sense of compassion towards the sick individual, these are inopportune times to achieve this. Suffice to say, though, that if one has no other opportunities to visit, he should definitely go even at these times. [ערוה"ש יו"ד ס' של"ה ס"ח, אהבת חסד ח"ג פ"ג]

3 – A POIGNANT OBSERVATION

Let's make this question a bit stronger.

We've explored many other mitzvohs governing interpersonal-relationships, and yet, interestingly we've not come across this element of prayer. In basic Jewish-consciousness, although prayer is most certainly an *important* element of *everything* we do in life⁵, it does not usually constitute an *intrinsic* component of the actual mitzvah.

Question: Why do we *not* find this element of prayer by other mitzvohs governing interpersonal-relationships? (i.e. charity or loans: give him the money, or the loan, and then pray that all should go well!)
What is the intrinsic relationship between Bikur Cholim and prayer??

The following source will help us understand this problem:

4 – THE HEALING TREE

Source 7. Shabbos 67a – Painting the tree is like a band-aid

<p>Abaye and Rava, both said: Anything that contains an element of healing does not contain an element of the prohibition against following the ways of the Amorite.⁶</p> <p>[The Gemara asks] Is that to say by inference that if it does not contain an element of healing, it does contain an element of the prohibition against following the ways of the Amorite? Wasn't it taught in a <i>baraisa</i>: "A tree that sheds its fruit prematurely, one paints it and colors it with red paint and loads it with stones"? It's understandable why he is permitted to load it with stones, because that action produces an actual benefit, since by doing so it's strength will weaken⁷. However, regarding painting it with red paint, what healing is he performing with that action??</p> <p>[The Gemara explains] He does so, so that people will see the tree and pray for its mercy. As it was taught in a <i>baraisa</i> with regard to the verse: "<i>And the metzora in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be ripped and the hair</i></p>	<p>אביי ורבא דאמרי תרווייהו כל דבר שיש בו משום רפואה אין בו משום דרכי האמורי [שיש בו משום רפואה - שנראית רפואתו כגון שתיית כוס ותחבושת מכה. רש"י]</p> <p>הא אין בו משום רפואה יש בו משום דרכי האמורי ופרכינן הא אין בו כל כגון לחש שאין ניכר שיהא מרפא יש בו משום דרכי האמורי בתמיה:</p> <p>והתניא אילן שמשיר פירותיו סוקרו (וצובע אותו) בסיקרא וטוענו באבנים בשלמא טוענו באבנים כי היכי דליכחוש חיליה אלא סוקרו בסיקרא מאי רפואה קעביד</p> <p>כי היכי דליחזייה אינשי וליבעו עליה רחמי כדתניא (ויקרא יג, מה) וטמא טמא יקרא</p>
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⁵ There are *many* examples/sources for this idea throughout the Torah. For one, the Talmud says "If only a person would pray all day!!" [ברכות כא.]. Moreover, the Derech Hashem says that prayer is "the first, and most important step in ones *hishtadlus* (efforts)" [ה"ד, פ"ה].

⁶ The Amorites were an ancient nation of idol-worshippers. Halacha forbids one to do or wear certain things which resemble the customs of their idol-worshipping conducts.

⁷ Sometimes a tree sheds its fruits prematurely due to excessive blossoming. Sustaining those blossoms taxes the tree, rendering it incapable of sustaining the fruits that grow from the blossoms. The stones were used to slightly weaken the tree when blossoming, thereby reducing the number of blossoms that the tree must nourish.

<p><i>of his head shall grow long and he will put a covering upon his upper lip and will cry: Impure, impure” (Vayikra 13:45). The metzora publicizes the fact that he is ritually impure because he must announce his pain to the masses, and the masses will pray for mercy on his behalf.</i></p>	<p>צריך להודיע צערו לרבים ורבים יבקשו עליו רחמים</p>
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Aside from being a generally fascinating Gemara, the point we want to zero-in on and take out is the following: prayer is a natural remedy. (That’s why splotching the tree with paint, so that its condition will improve, is not a problem of ‘the ways of the Amorites’).

What does this mean exactly?

Health, in particular, is something that we identify is out of our control, and that we need Divine assistance to succeed.

(Answer): In other words, it’s true: even in other realms of life, the needy-person’s success is entirely dependent on Divine assistance (As a great man once said: “Try raising your right hand. Ok, now, try raising your right hand without God’s help!). However, in the natural world of cause & effect in which we live there are sufficient means of efforts (“*hishtadlus*”) that we can do to remedy a problem: he needs money so give him money; he needs a job, so give him a job; he needs guidance, so give him guidance, etc.... Regarding health, though, there’s limited ways we can help other than to pray. Prayer, then, is in fact one of the main things we can do to help.



Just as taking medicines and putting on a band aid is viewed as a natural form of remedy, so too prayer on another’s behalf.

EXAMPLES:

1. Avi and his wife are vacationing together in Israel. On their way to visit the Kotel, Avi gets a text message from someone back home, explaining that, unfortunately, a friend of theirs has fallen ill. Avi knows that from North America to the Kotel it's a 'long distance' call, but for him it's only local charges. *Is praying at the Kotel on his friends' behalf a fulfillment of bikur cholim?*
2. Brian's grandfather is in the hospital, and he's not seen him in quite some time. On the one hand, Brian certainly feels a bit guilty, but on the other hand, he justifies it a bit to himself, saying "listen, Grandpa's well taken care of there. What does he really need my help for anyways?" Is this indeed a legitimate excuse?
3. Rachelli would very much like to go visit her friend Maya, who's sick at home for days now with strep-throat, but she's worried for herself that she may contract the sickness. Her friends – and even Dr. Google! – have all reassured her that her concern is far-fetched. Even still, *does this slight concern exempt her from the mitzvah of bikur cholim??*⁸
4. Mike's a busy guy: he works downtown, he hustles, starts his days early, and he often doesn't make it home until well in to the evening. Even still, he'd really like to do the mitzvah of *bikur cholim* with his buddy Rob, who's been cooped-up in bed after back-surgery for the past few weeks. He can only go visit him later at night, but he heard about some Talmudic idea that one shouldn't go during the last 3-hours of the day...*what should he do?*
5. Toby's pumped-up following his most recent learning session about *bikur cholim*, and goes straight to visit his mother, who's sick at home with the flu. He knows chicken soup is a good idea, but the whole 'prayer' thing is quite new to him. In fact, he has absolutely no idea what to say! *What should Toby's pray for, exactly?*
6. Sarah is in Israel visiting her family, when she finds out that her good friend Lilly has fallen ill back home in Toronto. She immediately finds out from Lilly's family when would be a good time to be in touch, and face-times Lilly at the soonest convenience. As the two friends begin their conversation, Sarah thinks to herself: "Hmmm, is face-time a fulfillment of *bikur cholim*?" *What do you think?*

⁸ עיין שו"ת הרמ"א סי' כ', ושו"ת ציץ אליעזר ח"ט סי"ז שמחלק בין חשש בעלמא וסכנה ודאיית