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## Articles

Bonita Taylor and David Zucker **The Bountiful Blessings of Bikur Holim**

Throughout the year, we are frequently approached by non-Jewish chaplains (some of whom are directors of pastoral care) who are interested in attracting Jewish volunteers to visit with Jewish patients (residents, clients, et al). Sometimes, these chaplains have been approached by local synagogues whose members wish to volunteer to visit on Shabbat (the Sabbath) and/or holy days and holidays. This article is in response to these queries.

All of us need blessings in our lives. Blessings enrich us, they lift up our spirits, and they nourish our souls. Generally when we think of bringing blessings to others, we forget that in the very bringing, we receive blessings in return. This is especially true of the Jewish value of bikur holim [bikur cholim] (pronounced bee-koor kho-leem). Bikur holim translates as visiting the ill. It refers to the Jewish practice of visiting those who are compromised by either transient or on-going ill health. These visitors bring community, camaraderie, and connection. They bring “chicken soup” – sometimes for the body and always – for the soul.

In Jewish tradition, visiting those who are unwell is an expectation of all people. It is not a task that is reserved for professionals, whether they are clergy or laity in related “helping” fields. Everyone shares the same obligation to partner with God in being attentive to those who are compromised (Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 40a). It is a mitzvah, whether this word is translated as a commandment or a blessing. The ancient rabbis saw bikur holim as having the potential to be a healing intervention. They suggested that “whoever visits the sick removes 1/60th of that individual’s distress (Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 39b). Each succeeding visitor - even if it is only to lend an attentive presence - removes 1/60th of the person’s existing condition at that specific moment. In other words, the first visitor takes 1/60th, and then, the second visitor takes away 1/60th of the person’s remaining illness, ad infinitum. Each caring visitor then, through their very presence, brings a measure of comfort.

Interestingly, when we take the time to be actively present with people who may be feeling set aside from a world that goes on without them, we experience a sense of enhanced well-being. If that were not motivation enough, Jewish tradition suggests that visiting with those who are unwell provides the visitor with a “credit” which will be redeemed in the World-to-Come (the Jewish version of Heaven). Visiting the sick then is an important gift for the compromised person visited as well as for the visitor. We shall reflect further upon on this at the close of this article.

Sometimes just being there is enough for a bikur holim visit to be successful. Often those who are confined to a bed, who are restricted to their room or who are unable to cope any longer with the outside world rightfully feel isolated from the life that they once knew and valued. Over time, they crave company, particularly another person who does not “have to be there” to draw blood, change a dressing, provide meals, and/or fulfill some legal or familial obligation. The opening lines of Genesis 18 provide an interesting example. According to rabbinic tradition, Abraham was recovering from an

operation when – without prior notice – he was visited by three strangers, one of whom was the angel Raphael, who is tasked with healing (Babylonian Talmud Yoma 37a). It is clear from the text that Abraham benefited from their unexpected presence and their engaging him in dialogue. The Bible records only part of their conversation, but it is likely that they chatted about matters both mundane and important. We too, can simply pass the time; we need not discuss matters that are world-shaking. After all, if someone is unwell, they may not have the energy for intense conversation. On the other hand, engaging people in more meaningful and/or controversial dialogue about the world at-large, may demonstrate to them that you still think they are viable members of the community.

Yet, even limited moments of silence may be valued during a bikur holim visit. Although most of the book of Job focuses on lengthy discourses concerning theodicy, God's goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil, we often forget that when Job's friends come to visit they simply sit with him. "They sat with him . . . no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great." (Job 2:13) Later in the book, Job will lament to them of his losses. As they spend time together, his friends offer their thoughts by way of support. Notice that their replies fail to bring him the comfort that they had intended.

At other times, being actively present in a practical way is the just the right approach for a bikur holim visit. A story is told of Rabbi Akiba who lived about 1800 years ago. One of his students was unwell. Apparently, none of the other students were planning to visit their peer – maybe because of fear of contagion or because they were busy with other obligations. So the rabbi himself straightened up and cleaned his student's home. The student recovered and credited his recuperation to the rabbi's very practical visit (Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 40a).

There are some wonderful sources, which address ways that visitors can offer effective bikur holim, and we include some in the bibliography that concludes this article. In this next section we highlight, in a condensed way, some key points for visiting those who are compromised either by transient or on-going unwellness, including aging.

Be There; Be Present; Be a Blessing; Be Gone.

Be There

Visits do not just happen by themselves. Visits take preplanning, and that planning involves more than just your schedule. They also need to fit in with the needs of the person that you are visiting. The famous 12th century physician and scholar Moses Maimonides instructed that visits should be engaged as long as they do not inconvenience the patient (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Mourning, XV: 5).

Always determine first if there is a time that works both for you and the person being visited. If you are visiting someone at home, make sure that they are able to get up to answer the door without causing undue strain. If you are visiting at a hospital or a long-term care facility, check on the routine of that establishment. You will want to avoid mealtimes and the person's test or treatment times. If you visit on a Sabbath or a holy day, check the times when religious Services might be taking place. By the way, in long-term facilities, prayer often becomes treasured in ways that are different from the manner in which they were handled when the compromised person was well; consequently, it is not unusual for Christians to attend Jewish Services or Jews to attend Christian Services.

Think about the wisdom of bringing or not bringing food. Does the person have allergies, food limitations, or does the institution follow certain dietary restrictions? For example, if you want to share Shabbat or other holy days, think about whether to bring wine or grape juice, hallah or gluten-free hallah, candles or electric candles.

Prior to entering the room of the ill person, take a moment to center yourself. Perhaps take a deep breath. The person you have come to see may not look their best. If the visit is in a hospital, the person

may be intubated (have tubes connected to their bodies or running into their nose or mouth), and in any case, may be dressed in a flimsy, immodest hospital gown. A person who normally wears a wig or a toupee, may look different, for that item may not be in place or may be askew. When you enter, even though you may know the person, introduce yourself. This is particularly important if you represent an organization. If there is someone else in the room, whether another patient, a staffer or another visitor, acknowledge that person and offer a friendly greeting.

Most importantly, if you have set a time to be there, be on time. Certainly, your time is valuable, but you honor the person that you are visiting if you come when you said you would. Not to do so suggests that they have nothing else to do but wait for you to arrive. Even if this is true, they may view it as a sign of disrespect if you behave as though it were so.

## Be Present

Being in the room with someone is not the same thing as being present with them. Being present means being actively attentive to the person in front of you. It means not talking about your last appointment or what you need to do when you leave. It may mean missing the sports tournament that is being televised or the latest episode of your favorite soap opera while you are there. It may mean setting aside your iPod, iPad, Blackberry, and cell phone – even when it rings until you have left. Letting your phone go to voice mail may show the person visited that you respect and are fully present with them.

Being present means listening twice as much as you speak. It means letting your responses be compassionate and emotionally empathetic and interested. People like to talk about themselves. Encourage them to dialogue, even if you have heard their story before. Let the person know that who they are is important and that their time on earth matters and makes a difference to you and to others.

Be mindful if you are coming from work, for example, that you might be hungry. The hospital cafeteria may be closed and the nursing home may not have a snack shop so, pick up something to eat before you visit. Never share their food, nor share your own, not only because of possible contagion, but also because the amount of the food they ingest may be monitored. When visiting someone at home, they might offer you something to eat. If you can do so without being offensive, politely decline their offer, or be most sparing in your intake. Consider that they may be on a fixed income. Even if they are not, shopping may be difficult and they may depend upon when others (neighbors or home attendants) go shopping. It is conceivable that the food you eat in their home was supposed to last them for several days.

Also be mindful if you are making a home visit that their home may not be as clean or as tidy as they would like it to be for visitors. Always ask permission before visiting someone in their home. They may find a regular telephone call – for example, every Tuesday at 11 am or the first Wednesday of the month – less stressful and more spiritually healing. It gives them something to look forward to. If the homebound individual is already competent with email or twitter, consider using these vehicles of social media to offer community, camaraderie and connection.

Finally, if the person has another visitor, remember that it is the patient (resident, client) that you have come to see. This is not a social occasion to catch up on the latest news with long-time-no-see family and/or friends.

## Be a Blessing

In Jewish tradition, simply praying for someone who is vulnerable is a mitzvah, a commandment, a good deed, wherever one fits within the wide streams of Judaism (Code of Jewish Law/Kitzur Shulhan Arukh, 4, 193.3). Consider offering a prayer while you are there or just before you leave – even if it is a simple

prayer. When you pray for someone, you are also praying before the Divine Presence who is at the person's bedside. Your prayer can be spontaneous, personal, and appropriate for the occasion. Indeed, this kind of a "custom-made" direct-for-you prayer is much more emotionally satisfying to patients (residents, clients) than a one-size-fits-all institutionalized prayer.

Many Jews do not know that intercessory prayers have a long and honored place within Judaism, reaching back to biblical days. Moses prays for Miriam's health, Elijah and Elisha seek the health of people before them. At the close of the book, Job prays for his friends (Job 42:10). Prayer is no more the purview and privilege of rabbis and cantors than are bikur holim visits. Anyone can pray. Think of prayer as simply being in conversation with God.

You might begin with a couple of relevant questions. "I would like to say a prayer, would that be OK?" Then, if the person gives consent, you might ask, If you could feel God's presence here in the room, what would you want to say to God? Then, blend that information into a prayer.

A simple formula is this:

"Dear God (or simply, "Source of Breath") I am here with \_\_\_\_\_ (list the person's name) at \_\_\_\_\_ (their home; XYZ Hospital; ABC Long-Term Care Center, etc.)

\_\_\_\_\_ (person's name) is not feeling well. \_\_\_\_\_ (person's name) wants you to know that \_\_\_\_\_ (person's name) \_\_\_\_\_ . Please let \_\_\_\_\_ (person's name) feel your Presence, especially in terms of their \_\_\_\_\_ (heart, liver, leg, arm, internal organs . . . if you know this information).

May she/he soon feel stronger, and know better health."

Do not pray for a refu-ah shlei-mah – a complete recovery – for under the circumstances that may not be possible. If a person is experiencing the inevitability of aging, they are not suddenly going to become young again. To speak of a complete recovery leaves them feeling "unseen" and "unheard." Asking for something that is unlikely to occur, no matter how hard everyone wants it, can leave a vulnerable person disappointed in themselves about their situation, in the medical team for failing them, and/or in God for abandoning them. This would be counterproductive and spiritually harmful.

Be Gone

Do not overstay your visit. Be sensitive about staying too long. People who are feeling so "under the weather" or suffering from many of the vicissitudes of aging that they need specialized treatment, may tire easily. Listen to what the person that you are visiting says – but – also watch what they do. Non-verbal body language conveys meaning.

A general rule is that a 15 to 20-minute visit is the maximum time to spend with someone. This is true even if you have travelled a long distance to see them.

Finally, be respectful of the person's privacy. What you see or hear is not to be shared with others. Even if – especially if – they have celebrity status in your community.

Doing bikur holim is a blessing for others, but it is also a blessing for us. In Judaism's daily prayers, we are urged regularly to perform numerous community-centered kindly acts. Visiting those who are unwell is psychologically and emotionally draining; it is hard work. It is also mitzvah-work, and we have every right to feel good about the time that we spend doing this, especially when we do it well. Visiting others is not only a good in itself, it also sets an example for others to follow in our footsteps.

Of course, we hope that we would be the visitor; however, the time may come when we will be the ones visited. As we set an example for others, so we may in time be the recipients of someone else's

kindness.

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