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## VISITING THE SICK

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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 fulfills the mitzvah of loving one's fellow Jew. The mitzvah is fulfilled by much more than just taking care of a patient's physical needs. Essential components of this mitzvah are to sensitize oneself to help ease the emotional distress of the patient and to 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. Let us try to understand some of the myriad levels of significance of this mitzvah as well as sensitize ourselves to some of its nuances.

This class will address the following questions:

- ∞ What is the spiritual root of the mitzvah to visit the sick?
- ∞ How important is the mitzvah of visiting the sick?
- ∞ How exactly does one fulfill this mitzvah?
- ∞ What should one's objectives be when visiting a sick person?
- ∞ What is the reward the Torah promises for visiting the sick?
- ∞ Can this mitzvah serve as a paradigm of the Torah's vision for our interpersonal behavior in general? If so, in what ways?

**Class Outline:**

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## SECTION I. THE MITZVAH TO VISIT THE SICK

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### PART A. LOVING ONE'S FELLOW

Taking time to understand the patient and his condition, and then acting lovingly and compassionately is Judaism's overarching goal in visiting the sick, as illustrated dramatically in the following story told by Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D.

*Early in my career I served as a psychiatrist in a large state hospital where there were hundreds of mentally ill patients, some of whom had been there for many years. Medical students would visit the hospital periodically and I would tour the facility with them, pointing out "museum pieces," i.e., cases that are described in psychiatric literature but rarely encountered outside of an institution.*

*On touring a chronic care building I pointed out a man who was the most "senior" patient in the hospital. He had been admitted fifty-two years earlier at the age of seventeen, later diagnosed with schizophrenia. His records showed that he had not spoken a single word in fifty-two years.*

*The patient had a routine whereby following breakfast he would go to a corner of the community room and assume an absurd contorted position with his hands directed upward, and he would maintain this position for hours until he was called to lunch. Following lunch he would return to this position until supper, and thereafter until bedtime. Neither talk therapy nor medications nor electroshock treatment had served to alter this behavior, which he had maintained all these years. No amount of urging could get him to sit down except at mealtime and he often developed edema of his feet as a result of his immobility and his posture.*

*On one of the medical students' visits, one young man asked if he could talk to the patient. "Certainly," I said, wondering what impact he thought he could make on this patient when decades of psychiatric efforts had failed.*

*The student approached the patient and said, "You must be tired. Go sit down." The man gave him a blank stare and did not move. The student then assumed the contorted position of the patient, equaling his posture with great precision, and then said, "I'll stand here like this. You can go sit down." Without a word, the patient sat down on a bench for the first time in fifty-two years!*

*While it is impossible to know what was going on in this man's mind, it is likely that his delusion may have been that by assuming this particular position, he was holding up the universe, and he clearly could not submit to all entreaties to leave that position, lest the world collapse. (You may ask, as we all did, why did he leave to eat and sleep? But there was no rationale to this behavior.)*

*For all those years no one had understood this person until an ingenious medical student solved the mystery. But why? Granted this was irrational behavior but what we suddenly understood was that this unusual behavior had great meaning to the patient, but no one had tried to understand it. The strange behavior was just dismissed as "crazy" and no more consideration was given it or him. But by showing this patient compassion and understanding, the medical student gained a mitzvah, he showed kindness and allowed the patient to feel some relief. Further, a connection was formed between the irrational mind and the rational. Who knows how far such an understanding might have gone if it had happened many years before. (Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D., *Do Unto Others*, Andrew McMeel Publishing, pp. 45-47.)*

We will now examine the details of Judaism's approach to visiting the sick.

### 1. **Vayikra (Leviticus) 19:18; Rashi, ibid.**

You should love your fellow as [you love] yourself.

Rashi:

Rabbi Akiva says: “This is an overarching principle in the Torah.”

ואהבת לרעך כמוך אני ה':

רש"י:

אמר רבי עקיבא: זה כלל גדול בתורה.

Although God instructs us to “love your fellow as yourself,” no explicit details are given in the Written Torah. Based on the Oral Torah, the Rambam (Maimonides) explains:

### 2. **Rambam, Hilchot Aveil (Laws of Mourning) 14:1 – Visiting the sick is one of the ways to fulfill the mitzvah to love one’s fellow as oneself.**

There is a Rabbinic obligation to visit the sick, to comfort mourners, to bury the dead, to escort a bride [to the marriage canopy], to escort guests ... All these are acts of loving-kindness performed with one’s body, and there is no limit to them.

Although these mitzvot were specified by the Sages, they are also included in the [Torah-mandated] mitzvah of “You should love your fellow as yourself” (Vayikra 19:18) – anything that you would want others to do for you, you should do for your fellow.

מצוות עשה של דבריהם לבקר חולים, ולנחם אבילים, ולהוציא המת, ולהכניס הכלה, וללוות האורחים ... ואלו הן גמילות חסדים שבגופו שאין להם שיעור.

אף על פי שכל מצוות אלו מדבריהם, הרי הן בכלל ואהבת לרעך כמוך, כל הדברים שאתה רוצה שיעשו אותם לך אחרים, עשה אותן אתה לאחידך ...

Although there is a general Torah-mandated mitzvah to love one’s fellow as oneself, and this can be fulfilled in many different forms, the Sages specified that certain forms of kindness take precedence over others, and therefore the Rambam specifically lists “visiting the sick, comforting mourners,” etc.

For example, for the first three days after giving birth, a mother is usually bedridden and therefore has the *halachic* status of a sick person (*choleh*). Based on the above Rambam, the obligation to visit the mother in hospital takes priority over baking a cake for the Brit (or Kiddush). Baking a cake is also a form of loving one’s fellow, but has lower precedence than visiting the sick (assuming they entail the same effort) (Heard from Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, Jerusalem.). However, if she *wants* a cake to be baked, then this would take precedence, since the mitzvah of loving one’s fellow is to fulfill the needs and wants of one’s fellow (Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Jerusalem).

## PART B. DOING WHAT’S RIGHT

Any time one does an act of kindness motivated by the fact that “it’s the right thing to do,” one fulfills the mitzvah to do what is “fair and good”:

### 1. **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 6:18 – The mitzvah to do what is “fair and good.”**

You must do what is fair and good in the eyes of God, so that it will be good for you ...

ועשית הישר והטוב בעיני ה' למען ייטב לך ...

The Ramban (Nachmanides) explains the above verse:

2. **Ramban, Devarim 6:18 – Since the Torah could never practically specify the correct conduct for every life situation, God gives us a general guideline: do what is fair and good in His eyes. Visiting the sick falls into this category.**

The intention behind the mitzvah to do what is “fair and good” is the following: the previous verse states, “You must keep His decrees and testimonies that He commanded you” (Devarim 6:17). Now this verse is saying: “Even regarding matters in which I have *not* explicitly commanded you, make sure to do what is good and right in God’s eyes, because He loves that which is good and right.”

This is an important principle. It would be impossible for the Torah to specify the proper [interpersonal] conduct for *every* life situation regarding neighbors, friends, businesses, communities, and countries.

The Torah does, however, specify the proper conduct for *many* situations, even if not for *all* situations. For example: “You shall not be a gossipmonger among your people” (Vayikra 19:16), “Do not take revenge or bear a grudge” (ibid. 19:18), “Do not stand idly by while your brother’s blood is shed” [i.e. do not be apathetic to the danger or financial losses facing others] (ibid. 19:16), “Do not curse a deaf person” (ibid. 19:14), “Stand up for an old person” (ibid. 19:32), etc.

Our verse now states a *general* principle to do what is good and right in *all* life situations.

... והכוונה בזה, כי מתחלה אמר: שתשמור חקותיו ועדותיו אשר צוך, ועתה יאמר: גם באשר לא צוך תן דעתך לעשות הטוב והישר בעיניו, כי הוא אוהב הטוב והישר:

וזה ענין גדול, לפי שאי אפשר להזכיר בתורה כל הנהגות האדם עם שכניו ורעיו, וכל משאו ומתנו, ותקוני הישוב והמדינות כלם,

אבל אחרי שהזכיר מהם הרבה, כגון לא תלך רכיל (ויקרא יט טז), לא תקום ולא תטור (שם פסוק יח), ולא תעמוד על דם רעך (שם פסוק טז), לא תקלל חרש (שם פסוק יד), מפני שיבה תקום (שם פסוק לב), וכיוצא בהן,

חזר לומר בדרך כלל שיעשה הטוב והישר בכל דבר ...

A person’s natural sense of wanting to be “a good person” is a very valuable asset in the eyes of the Torah. For God asks that we do what is “fair and good” in all situations, even if He didn’t tell us exactly how. Therefore, visiting the sick and having in mind that it’s the right thing to do is a fulfillment of this mitzvah to do what is “fair and good” (heard from Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, Jerusalem).

## PART C. EMULATING GOD’S WAYS

One of the ways we fulfill the mitzvah to emulate God is by visiting the sick – as God Himself visited Avraham after his circumcision.

1. **Devarim 13:5 – The Infinite God calls on finite man to walk in His ways and draw close to Him. How is this possible?**

After the Lord your God, shall you follow, and

אחרי ה' אלוקיכם תלכו ואתו תיראו ואת מצותיו

Him shall you fear. Keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cleave to Him.

תשמרו ובקלו תשמעו ואתו תעבדו ובו תדבקו:

There is a Torah mitzvah to “follow after God” (Devarim 13:5) and “walk in His ways” (Devarim 28:9) (Sefer HaChinuch, mitzvah #611; Rambam, Sefer HaMitzvot, mitzvah #8). What does this mean and how is it possible to do this?

In order to answer the above questions we need to refer to the following incident in the Torah:

## 2. Bereishit (Genesis) 18:1 – God appears to Avraham after his circumcision.

God appeared to him [Avraham] in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to the tent in the heat of the day.

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהֵי ה' בְּאַלְנֵי מִמְרָא וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח הָאֵהָל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם.

## 3. Rashi, ibid. – God had come to visit Avraham since he was weak and sick following his circumcision.

“And God appeared to him” – to visit the sick. [The Amora] Rabbi Chama Bar Chanina said: It was the third day after his circumcision, and the Holy One, Blessed be He, came and inquired about Avraham’s welfare.

וירא אליו – לבקר את החולה. אמר רבי חמא בר חנינא יום שלישי למילתו היה ובא הקב"ה לשאול בשלומו.

## 4. Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Sotah 14a – When a person emulates the ways in which God cares for His creatures (as described in the Torah narratives), then that person “walks in His ways” and cleaves to Him.

Rabbi Chama bar Chanina said, “What is the meaning of the verse, ‘After the Lord your God, shall you follow’ (Devarim 13:5)? Is it possible for a person to walk and follow the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence)?

“Rather, this teaches us to emulate God’s attributes: Just as ... He visits the sick, as it is written: ‘God appeared to him [Avraham who was recovering from his circumcision] in the plains of Mamre’ (Bereishit 18:1), so must you visit the sick.”

ואמר רבי חמא בר חנינא מאי דכתיב אחרי ה' אלקיכם תלכו וכי אפשר לו לאדם להלך אחר שכינה? ...

אלא הלך אחר מידותיו: מזה הוא ... ביקר חולים דכתיב וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא, אף אתה בקר חולים.

Therefore, visiting the sick is one of the ways to fulfill the mitzvah of emulating God by “walking in His ways.”

In a passage in which Yitro (Jethro) offers wise counsel to Moshe (Moses) on how he should conduct his leadership (Shemot/Exodus 18:20), the action of “walking” in the correct path also refers to visiting the sick, and is explained by the Maharsha.

5. **Talmud Bavli, Bava Metzia 30b – “Walking” in the correct path refers to visiting the sick.**

Rabbi Yosef taught [the meaning of the following verse]: “You shall make known to them *the path* [in which they should walk and the deeds that they should do]” (Shemot 18:20) – this refers to [performing acts of] loving-kindness in general. [This phrase:] “In which they should *walk*” refers to visiting the sick.

דתני רב יוסף “יהודעת להם... את הדרך [ילכו בה ואת המעשה אשר יעשו]” זו גמילות חסדים. “ילכו” זה ביקור חולים.

6. **Maharsha, Chidushei Agadot, ibid. – Visiting the sick can be fulfilled simply by walking to be present at the patient’s bedside.**

Why do the words, “in which they should walk” refer specifically to visiting the sick?

Because simply by walking to the sick person – with no other activity – one can fulfill this mitzvah.

“ילכו בה זו ביקור חולים” –

דבהליכתו שם בלחוד בלי שום מעשה מקיימה...

Although this mitzvah is comprised of a number of details (as we shall see in Section III), one’s mere presence in the room or at the bedside of the sick person is a fulfillment of it. For what did God do when he came to visit Avraham who was weak and recovering? He simply “appeared to him” (Devarim 18:1, Source 2 above), and therefore the minimum requirement for this mitzvah is to be there in person (heard from Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, Jerusalem; Gur Aryeh, Bereishit 18:1, s.v. *lifikach*).

**PART D. OTHER MITZVOT THAT MAY APPLY**

1. **Rabbi Yitzchak Silver, The Code of Jewish Conduct, p. 256 – When the visit involves saving a life, then one fulfills other mitzvot as well.**

In a case where the visit is crucial and life saving, we also fulfill the mitzvah of saving a life (Vayikra 25:36, “*vechai achicha imach*”); returning a lost object, which, according to the Sages, includes saving someone’s life (Devarim 22:1, “*vehasheivosa*”); and not standing by while someone’s blood is being shed (Vayikra 19:19, “*lo sa’amod al dam rei’echa*”) (cited in Mishpetei Shalom 14:1).

There is another important concept in Judaism that is relevant to visiting the sick: all of the Jewish people are like one body (Tomer Devorah, Ch. 1; Talmud Yerushalmi, Nedarim 9:4). For example, if the left arm is injured, the right arm feels the pain. We don’t just say, “I’ll ignore my other arm.” Rather, just as all the limbs of the body must work together for their overall health, so too all the members of the Jewish people must work together for their overall physical and spiritual health. If other people are unable to achieve their purpose in life through ill health, then my purpose in life is also compromised. (See the Morasha class on: *Areivut* for a fuller discussion of this concept.)

This idea is expressed most beautifully by Rabbi Aryeh Levine who once went with his wife to the doctor to have her foot treated. When asked what the problem was he said, “Doctor, out foot hurts us” (A Tzaddik in Our Time, Rabbi Simcha Raz).

Furthermore, the next source stresses that visiting the sick – and indeed all the mitzvot of interpersonal relationships – should be done as an expression of true love for others, and not just to “fulfill the mitzvah.”

2. **Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, written correspondence; Rabbi Moshe Shapira, Re'eh Emunah p. 291 – Caring for one's fellow must be a natural expression of love stemming from one's personality and not a mechanical fulfillment of the mitzvot.**

The correct approach to visiting the sick is to give the patient the impression that you *naturally* love and care for him, and want to connect to him. One should not give him the impression that one is doing it simply because it is a mitzvah in the Torah.

In other words, the Torah instructs us to perform an act of kindness in a way that it appears that it was never commanded. Instead it should appear as if it is totally natural (*Rabbi Reuven Leuchter*).

[Therefore,] consider someone who brings food to a sick person in the same manner in which he puts on *tefillin*, where he is motivated solely because God has instructed him to do so. Even though ultimately he is doing an act of kindness when he brings the food, there is still something missing from the mitzvah. He is doing it as if it were a *chok*, a super-rational instruction from God, rather than doing it as a *mishpat*, which is a rational mitzvah that makes sense to us. God did not command us to perform the mitzvot in such a [routine] manner (*Rabbi Moshe Shapira*).

הגישה הנכונה היא, שהולכים לביקור חולים ונותנים את התחושה שעושים זאת בגלל שאדם בטבעו אוהב אחרים ומתקשר למישהו אחר, ולא בגלל ציווי התורה.

כלומר: התורה מצווה לעשות המעשה כאילו שאין כאן ציווי, אלא בצורה טבעית דווקא. (ר' ראובן לויכטר)

מי שמביא אוכל לחדר חולה, כמו שהוא מניח תפילין, ועושה זאת לשם שמים בגלל שהקב"ה ציווה בלבד, הרי אע"פ שבסופו של דבר המעשה יעשה, הרי זו פגם בגוף המצוה, שהרי עושה את המצוה כ'חוקים', ולא כ'משפטים', ולא באופן זה הקב"ה ציווה בהם. (ר' משה שפירא)

#### KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ∞ In Judaism, there is nothing mundane about day-to-day to life. Every action can be charged with spiritual content and take on eternal meaning. This concept is expressed most potently in visiting the sick. Merely by standing at the bedside of a sick person to keep him company, one is raised up to the level of walking in the ways of God. Just as God Himself appeared to Avraham as he recovered from the physical ordeal of circumcision, so too we can emulate God when we visit a sick person.
- ∞ Of course, an expression of compassion and care for the sick raises one from the level of animal to human – an animal doesn't visit the sick. But it is astounding to note that in the eyes of the Torah it also raises one from the level of human to become God-like!
- ∞ At the same time, the very same expression of caring for the sick has another dimension of significance, for it is also reckoned as a fulfillment of the mitzvah to love one's fellow as one's self, as well as to do what is good in the eyes of God. And if the visit is life-saving, then one also participates in the mitzvah of saving a life, returning a lost object (i.e. returning his life), and not standing idly by while someone's blood is being shed.
- ∞ God did not command us to perform the mitzvot in a routine manner. This is especially true when visiting the sick, when we should feel and show sincere compassion and concern for our fellow Jew.

## SECTION II. THE IMPORTANCE OF VISITING THE SICK

### PART A. KINDNESS AND CONSIDERATION ARE A PREREQUISITE FOR TORAH

Visiting the sick is an expression of kindness and consideration for the well-being of another person. So highly regarded are these character traits as part of one's everyday conduct that they are seen as prerequisites for Torah study:

1. **Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 3:17; commentary of Rabbeinu Simcha, Machzor Vitri, Ch. 426; Rabbi Pinchas Kehati, Mishnayot Mevu'rot– A person needs to be civilized enough to care about others (*derech erez*) in order that he be able to attain Torah wisdom.**

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariya says, "If there is no Torah study there cannot be proper conduct [*derech erez*]. If there is not proper conduct there cannot be Torah study."

Machzor Vitri:

"If there is no proper conduct there can be no Torah study" – if a person is not already civilized and cultured enough to act properly towards others, then the Torah that he studies will not improve him. Furthermore, he will eventually forget what he studies.

Kehati:

"If a person lacks *derech erez*" – one who does not have good character traits and does not represent the epitome of interpersonal conduct "lacks Torah," in the sense that his Torah study has no value, and his very conduct degrades the majesty of the Torah.

רבי אלעזר בן עזריה אומר: אם אין תורה אין דרך ארץ, אם אין דרך ארץ אין תורה.

מחזור ויטרי, סימן תכו

ואם אין דרך ארץ אין תורה. שאם אין תרבות לאדם לנהג כשורה, אין תורתו מועלת לו כלום, ואינה מתקיימת בידו.

ר' פנחס קהתי

אם אין דרך ארץ – מי שאינו בעל מידות טובות ואינו נוהג יפה עם הבריות, אין תורה – אין ערך לתורתו, שכן התורה מתחללת ונמאסת על ידו.

Not only is caring about others (*derech erez*) a prerequisite to acquiring wisdom, but it is also a character trait that the Jewish people take pride in. For Judaism calls on us to be "a light unto the nations" (Yeshayah/Isaiah 42:6), a shining example to the world in terms of kindness and compassion.

### PART B. VISITING THE SICK HELPS TO HEAL THE PATIENT

1. **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

רב חלבו חלש נפק רב כהנא אכריו 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

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 they [Rabbi Akiva and his students] 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!'"

עקיבא לבקרו ובשביל שכיבדו וריבצו לפניו חיה. אמר ליה: 'רבי החייתני.'

יצא רבי עקיבא ודרש 'כל מי שאינו מבקר חולים כאילו שופך דמים'.

What if the patient already has visitors who are taking care of his needs? Is there still a mitzvah to visit him?

## 2. Maharal, Chidushei Agadot, Nedarim 40a – Every visitor has a unique power to bring the sick person new life, even if other people are visiting him.

Even if the patient has other people who are taking care of his needs, and [it appears that] he does not need you, it is still possible that you could do something unique that would breathe new life into him. It is for this reason that one who does not visit the sick is comparable to one who has spilled blood.

ואפילו אם יש לו כמה בני אדם שהם מתעסקים עם החולה ואין צריך אליו, סוף סוף אפשר שעל ידו היה החיות של החולה, והוא אינו עושה, לכך כאילו שופך דמים.

The following story shows how even a small gesture can revive a person – such is the power of the mitzvah to visit the sick.

*In the back of the synagogue where Rabbi Avraham Pam regularly prayed, there was an old man who could be found day after day in his customary seat. One day he was missing and Rabbi Pam's inquiries elicited the news that the man was sick in the hospital. Although Rabbi Pam wished to visit the man, he could not, because the rabbi was a Kohen. (Kohanim are in some circumstances forbidden to enter a hospital.) Instead, Rabbi Pam wrote the man a letter saying that his presence in synagogue was missed, that he prayed for his recovery every day, and that he would love to visit, but was unable to because he was a Kohen.*

*The old man was ecstatic with his mail. The great Rabbi Pam, the head of the famous Yeshivah Torah Veda'as, had written to him. He prayed for him. He would even have visited him if only he could. The man showed the letter to anyone who entered his room. His elated spirits soon boosted his physical strength as well, and a full recovery ensued. When Rabbi Pam heard of the impact his letter had made, he cried: "What did it take to write that letter? Nothing. A pen and a piece of paper. I jotted a few lines and sent it over."*

*With that quick gesture, he restored a person to life... (Rabbi Fishel Shachter, Chofetz Chaim: Loving Kindness, ArtScroll Publications, p. 314)*

## PART C. THE BODY IS A VEHICLE FOR THE SPIRITUAL VOYAGE

Unlike other religions, Judaism views the body as a critical component in achieving one's purpose in life. As described in the next source, the path of Judaism is therefore to engage the body and maintain its health, since it is the vehicle for the soul's spiritual voyage.

1. **Rabbi Akiva Tatz M.D., Letters to a Buddhist Jew, Targum Press – Unlike other religions, Judaism views the body as a critical component in achieving one's purpose in life.**

The highest exponents of the world's spiritual systems are monks and nuns, celibates and ascetics who have renounced the body in order to transcend it. But Judaism requires engaging the body; requires marriage, requires the experience of bodily pleasure, regards permanent celibacy as a negative ideal. Our path is not to separate body and soul but to engage the body and elevate it to the level of soul. For us, the body is not the point of departure for the spiritual voyage; it is the vehicle.

The body must not be left behind while mind and spirit transcend. It must be made to serve mind and spirit. And that is the meaning of the mitzvot, the commandments. The mitzvot are physical actions (there are very few mitzvot that are performed in consciousness alone) that express spirit. Every part of the body is commanded to act; each limb and organ performs an action that expresses Torah. Mitzvot are to Torah what body is to soul.

**KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:**

- ⇒ A few strokes of Rabbi Pam's pen on paper sent as a letter to a sick person; a few sweeps of Rabbi Akiva's broom to clean the floor of the patient's room. These actions seem trivial to us, but to a sick person who feels lonely, isolated, and possibly doesn't have the strength to clean his own room, these actions have the power to restore his spirit and his life. Even if someone else could perform the same function, perhaps your presence would be a unique contribution and the key to his return to health.
- ⇒ Finally, the importance of visiting the sick is underscored by the fact that Judaism regards the body as the vehicle for the soul's spiritual voyage, and therefore maintaining its health is important.

## SECTION III. HOW TO FULFILL THE MITZVAH OF VISITING THE SICK

For the purposes of the mitzvah to visit the sick, a *choleh* (sick person) is defined as one who is either:

- bed-ridden and weak, or
- in medical danger.

Therefore, one would have a mitzvah to visit someone who is bed-ridden and weak with influenza. A woman in the first three days after giving birth (or even longer, if she is still in the hospital) is also in this category. A person with pneumonia is in medical danger (since it has more than a 1% mortality rate), apart from being bed-ridden. However, a person who is housebound after breaking a leg does not fall into the category of a *choleh*, so there is no special mitzvah of visiting the sick in such a case – however one would still fulfill the mitzvah of loving one's fellow as oneself (heard from Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, citing Gur Aryeh, Bereishit 18:1).

1. **Rabbi Yitzchak Silver, Mishpetei HaShalom 14:8 – There are four main components to the mitzvah of visiting the sick.**

There are four essential components to the mitzvah of visiting the sick:

בעיקר מצות ביקור חולים יש ארבעה חלקים:

1. Taking care of all the patient's physical needs
2. Improving the patient's mood and peace of mind by having friends who help to carry the burden of his illness
3. Praying for [the recovery and health of] the patient. (Prayers said in the patient's presence are especially powerful for two reasons: the Divine Presence is to be found in the place of the sick; and when one is in the presence of the sufferer, he is moved to greater and more sincere depths of prayer.)
4. Removing one-sixtieth of the person's sickness

(א) עשיית כל צרכיו.

(ב) שימצא נחת רוח עם חבריו המשתתפים בצעריו.

(ג) שיתפללו עליו [במקום משכבו ששם השכינה נמצאת ובשעת התעוררות הרחמנות בצעריו].

(ד) שיטול אחד משישים מחליו.

The next sources detail each of the above components.

#### PART A. TAKING CARE OF THE PATIENT'S PHYSICAL NEEDS

##### 1. **Peirush HaRosh, Nedarim 40a – Rabbi Akiva and his students swept the floor of the sick person.**

*[Due to the fact that they, i.e. Rabbi Akiva and his students] swept and mopped the room, the patient lived* – For one who visits a sick person should see to it that all of his physical needs are taken care of.

שיכבדו וריבצו לפניו – כי הנכנס לבקר את החולה מפקח כל צרכיו.

##### 2. **Ramban, Torat HaAdam, Sha'ar HaMeichush – One should take care of the all the physical needs of the patient.**

We learn from here [i.e. the account of Rabbi Akiva] 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.

ושמעין מהכא דבקר חולים כדי שיכבדו וירביצו לפניו, ויעשו לו הצרכים הצריכים לחליו.

The primary objective of this mitzvah is to help the patient with all his needs (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 335:1, 2). "Sweeping and mopping" are not literal, but rather examples cited by the Gemara. Other examples are:

- Calling a doctor
- Obtaining medicine
- Shopping or cleaning his house if needed
- Bringing him food
- Making phone calls on his behalf

(Based on Journey to Virtue, Rabbi Avrohom Ehrman 57:2.)

## PART B. IMPROVING THE PATIENT'S MOOD AND PEACE OF MIND

### 1. Ramban, Torat HaAdam, Sha'ar HaMeichush – The patient's mood is improved when he sees that his health and recovery are important to others.

We learn from here [i.e. the account of Rabbi Akiva] that we visit the sick in order to ... improve the patient's mood and provide peace of mind by having friendly company.

ושמעין מהכא דבקר חולים כדי... וימצא נחת רוח עם חבריו.

The Ramban understands that by taking care of the physical needs of the patient, one shows him that others consider his recovery to full health to be important to them. One has to make sure that the patient knows that other people care about him and his recovery (Hilchot Bein Adam L'Chavero, Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, Vol. II, 2:5).

### 2. Maharal, Netivot Olam, Netiv Gemilut Chasadim, Ch. 4 – He also sees how many people consider him to be a friend.

One who visits the sick improves his mood and gives him peace of mind, since it is the manner of friends and companions to go to visit each other. [In other words: when people come to visit him, he realizes that they consider him to be their friend and companion, and his spirits are lifted.]

כי ביקור חולים הוא נחת רוח לחולה, ... ומפני שנהג בו מנהג הריעים וחברים שהולכים לבקר זה את זה...

If one visits a friend in the hospital, as one leaves, one should go around the room to wish the other patients a complete recovery (*refuah shleimah*) and ask them how they are coping. Apart from improving their spirits, the Rabbinic obligation to “visit the sick” applies to every sick person one encounters (heard from Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, based on Rambam, Hilchot Aveil 14:1). (This also refers to non-Jewish patients, since the kindly character traits that the Torah develops in a person extend to all human beings – Journey to Virtue, 57:27, citing Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 335:9).

Visiting an old age home is included in the mitzvah of visiting the sick. This is certainly true if the patient is a true *choleh* (either weak and bed-ridden or in medical danger). Even if he is not a *choleh*, he might be depressed, and improving his mood is included in the mitzvah of loving one's fellow as oneself (heard from Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits).

### 3. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur, Vol. II p. 210; Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, written correspondence – The visitor helps to bear the patient's burden.

We have been taught by our Sages that the mitzvot of visiting the sick and comforting mourners are expressions of the obligation to “help bear the burden of one's fellow” (*Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe*).

In summary: “Helping to bear another's burden” means entering into the world of the patient's feelings and thoughts, by vividly imagining oneself being in his situation. By doing this, one is literally together with him in his situation (*Rabbi Reuven Leuchter*).

קיבלנו מרבותינו כי מצוות ביקור חולים וניחום אבלים הן מענין נושא בעול עם חבריו. (ר' שלמה וולבה)

בקצרה נושא בעול חבריו הוא כניסה לתוך עולמו של השני על ידי ציור המצב שלו, ועל ידי זה הוא נמצא יחד עמו ממש. (ר' ראובן לויכטר)

A doctor can fulfill part of the mitzvah of visiting the sick if he smiles to the patient, explains what is happening to him, and shows sympathy (as long as his motivation is not only for money) (heard from Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, Jerusalem).

## PART C. PRAYING FOR THE RECOVERY AND HEALTH OF THE PATIENT

### 1. Talmud Bavli, Nedarim, 40a – One is required to pray for a sick person.

Rav Dimi said, “One who visits the sick, is as if he brought him life. One who fails to visit the sick, is as if he had caused him to die ... [How so?] One who visits the sick requests mercy for him that he will live ... one who does not visit the sick does not pray for mercy on his behalf.”

כי אתא רב דימי אמר: כל המבקר את החולה גורם לו שיחיה, וכל שאינו מבקר את החולה גורם לו שימות ... כל המבקר את החולה מבקש עליו רחמים שיחיה ... וכל שאין מבקר את החולה אין מבקש עליו רחמים ...

### 2. Ramban, Torat HaAdam, Sha'ar HaMeichush – By visiting the patient and seeing his condition, one is moved to pray more sincerely on his behalf.

We learn from here [i.e. the previous source, and the account of Rabbi Akiva who went to visit the sick] that we visit the sick in order to ... put oneself in the position where one is aroused to pray on the patient's behalf [with a more heartfelt prayer] ... Therefore, if one visits a sick person and does not pray on his behalf, one has not fulfilled the mitzvah.

ושמעין מהכא דבקר חולים ... כדי שיכוין דעתו לרחמים ויבקש עליו ... הלכך ביקר את החולה ולא ביקש עליו רחמים לא קיים המצוה.

Someone who visits a sick person and does not pray for him has not fulfilled the mitzvah properly (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 335:4).

### 3. Maharal, Netivot Olam, Netiv Gemilut Chasadim, Ch. 4 – Exerting oneself to travel to visit the patient is in itself a form of request for his health, and strengthens one's prayers.

By visiting a sick person, one is in essence asking for mercy on his behalf, since the very act of visiting him is essentially a request for the patient's life [and well-being]. [Therefore, the prayers one offers after visiting a sick person are an extension of requesting mercy for him.]

However, when one prays at home for the sick individual without having visited him, this is less effective since his prayers are not accompanied by an actual visit; this cannot be compared to going to the sick person's house to visit him, which in itself is a request [for mercy] for him.

ר"ל כאשר מבקר את החולה מבקש עליו רחמים, כי כך ענין הביקור עצמו שהוא בקשת חיות.

אבל בקשת רחמים בביתו בלא ביקור אינו כ"כ, כיון שלא בא ע"י מעשה של ביקור חולים אינו דומה אל זה כמו שהולך אל ביתו לבקרו, ודבר זה בקשה גמורה עליו.

The opportunity to pray for someone is even equated to saving a life in danger:

4. **Maharal, Netivot Olam, Netiv Gemilut Chasadim Ch. 4 – Not calling on God's innate compassion is like not saving someone who is in danger.**

For since God is compassionate and His attribute is to have mercy, therefore, one who does not request mercy [for a sick person] does not request that [God] should save him, and he is comparable to one who does not save the life of his fellow man whose life is in danger.

וביאור זה: כי מאחר שהשי"ת בעל רחמים, ומדתו לרחם, ולפיכך מי שאינו מבקש רחמים אין מבקש להצילו, ודומה כמו מי שאינו מציל אחר כאשר הוא בסכנה.

When praying for mercy in the patient's presence, one may pray in any language (since the *Shechinah* is present above the head of a sick person). However, if not in his presence, the prayer should preferably be said in Hebrew (Yoreh Deah 335:5, Taz 4). He should pray that the patient be granted a recovery among all other sick Jews so that the combined merit will help his prayers find acceptance (Yoreh Deah 335:6). Therefore, one says to the patient, "May the Almighty have compassion on you among all sick Jews."

**PART D. REMOVING ONE-SIXTIETH OF THE PATIENT'S SICKNESS**

1. **Talmud Bavli, Nedarim 39b; Ran, ibid. – Visiting a sick person removes one-sixtieth of his suffering (if the visitor shares the same astrological sign as the patient).**

Rabbi Acha Bar Chanina said: "One who visits a sick person removes one-sixtieth of his suffering."

Abaye said to Rava, "If this is so, then if sixty people were to visit the patient he would fully recover!"

Rava responded, "Each visitor removes one-sixtieth of what is left."

Ran:

[When does a visitor remove one-sixtieth of the patient's suffering]? When the visitor is a *ben gilo* [i.e. he is born into the same *mazal*, or zodiac constellation as the patient.]

אמר רבי אחא בר חנינא כל המבקר את החולה נוטל אחד משישים בצערו.

אמר ליה אביי לרבא א"כ ליעלון שיתין ולוקמוה?

אמר ליה כעישוריייתא דבי רבי ובבן גילו.

רן: שנוטל המבקר במזלו של חולה.

2. **Maharal, Chidushei Agadot, ibid., s.v. *notel echad* – Visitors help the patient feel he is a part of normal reality, and this alleviates his suffering.**

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 one-sixtieth of the malady."

Specifically when the visitor is a *ben gilo* of the

החולי הוא נבדל מן כלל הבריות כאשר הוא חולה, כי כלל הנבראים הם כאשר הם ראוים להיות, אבל החולי אשר יצא מבריות הוא נבדל מן הכלל. ובוה שמבקרים החולה והם מתחברים ומצטרפים אליו הנבראים, ובוה נוטל את חליו ממנו אחד משישים,

ולפיכך דוקא כאשר הוא בן גילו כי יש לו חיבור עמו...

patient [will one-sixtieth of his suffering be removed] since he has more of a connection with the visitor.

3. **Ben Yehoyada, Nedarim 39b, s.v. *u'bnei adam* – Since we are all interconnected, the sickness is removed from the patient.**

The way that this works is based on the essential interconnectedness and unity of the Jewish people. Therefore, a visit to a sick patient will per force help him.

וטעמו של דבר זה מכח האחדות שיש לישראל לכך יהיה מן הביקור תועלת זו.

4. ***Ibid.*, s.v. *notel echad* – Some of the suffering is actually transferred to the visitor and thus relieves the patient.**

[The idea is *not* that the visitor actually contracts some of the sickness, but rather] the idea of *ben gilo* is that since he is better able to identify with the sick person, he experiences a modicum – one-sixtieth – of the patient's discomfort and suffering. As a result of that, one-sixtieth of the patient's suffering will be relieved ... The suffering that is transferred to others [i.e. visitors] has the ability to protect and effect atonement [for the patient.]

אך הכוונה מחמת שהוא בן גילו, מגיע צערן לנפשו אחד ממששים מצערן של חולה, ואז ע"י צער זה המגיע לנפש המבקר יסלקו מן החולה א' ממששים מן החולי שבו ... כי הצער שייגיע לאחרים יש בו כח יותר להגן ולכפר.

### KEY THEMES OF SECTION III

- ⇒ The guiding principle of the details of visiting the sick is to tend to the patient's needs in a way that will aid his healing.
- ⇒ On a physical level, one should make efforts to take care of all the physical details: food, transport, medical care, shopping, laundry, etc. "What would I like done for me if I were sick?" is the guiding principle behind visiting the sick, and loving one's fellow as oneself in general.
- ⇒ On an emotional level, one's presence shows the sick person that his health is important to others, and his friends help bear his burden. Science confirms what the Torah has known all along – there is a strong connection between emotional and physical well-being, and thus the Talmud's comment is appropriate: "The white of a smile may be more nourishing than the white of a glass of milk" (Kesubot 111b).
- ⇒ On a spiritual level, the mitzvah also extends to praying to God for his friend's recovery.

## SECTION IV. OTHER TORAH SENSITIVITIES REGARDING VISITING THE SICK

### PART A. THE VISIT IS FOR THE PATIENT'S BENEFIT

#### 1. Talmud Bavli, Nedarim 41a – Do not cause the patient embarrassment due to his condition.

One should not visit someone suffering from an intestinal disorder ... because he will cause the patient embarrassment.

אין מבקרין לא חולי מעיים... משום כיסופא

#### 2. Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 335:8 – To both fulfill the mitzvah and avoid embarrassing the patient, it may be necessary to stand in the hallway outside the patient's room.

One should not enter the patient's room to visit him if he has an intestinal disorder [and will be embarrassed] or if he has pain in his head, eye or whole body that makes it difficult for him to talk [with his visitors].

אין מבקרין לא לחולי מעיים, ולא לחולי העין, ולא לחולי הראש. וכן כל חולי דתקיף ליה עלמא וקשה ליה דיבורא אין מבקרין אותו בפניו,

Rather,

- The visitor should come to the hallway outside his room and inquire after his welfare.
- The visitor should ask if the patient would like him to come inside the room to sweep and mop the floor [or take care of any other physical needs].
- The visitor should lend a listening ear to his suffering and distress.
- The visitor should pray for his recovery and health.

אלא נכנסין בבית החיצון,  
ושואלין ודורשין בו אם צריכין לכבד ולרבץ לפניו,  
וכיוצא בו,  
ושומעין צערו,  
ומבקשים עליו רחמים.

The general principle is that a person should only visit if doing so will be to the patient's benefit (Journey to Virtue, Rabbi Avrohom Ehrman, 57:4). Therefore, one should not visit a patient with intestinal disorders or other conditions that cause him embarrassment. Even so, one should still observe as much of the mitzvah as possible, and if one cannot sit beside him, such as in a case where the patient is in the intensive care unit of the hospital, he should follow the guidelines above (as in Source 2).

If a patient is quarantined with a contagious illness, then one should still inquire after his health from his family and close friends (The Code of Jewish Conduct, Rabbi Yitzchak Silver, p. 258).

### PART B. WHAT TIME OF DAY TO VISIT

The Sages (Nedarim 40a) taught that one should not pay a visit during the early part of the day (when illnesses are generally at their mildest and the visitor will not be stirred to pray earnestly), nor in the last part of the day (as the patient is often at his worst then, and one might despair of his recovery and not pray for him properly). The Rambam provides another reason:

## 1. Rambam, Hilchot Aveil 14:5 – One’s visit should not conflict with the patient’s care schedule.

One should not visit the patient in the first three hours of the day, nor in the last three hours of the day, because they [the doctors] are taking care of his needs.

ואין מבקרין לא בשלוש שעות ראשונות ביום, ולא בשלוש אחרונות, מפני שהן מתעסקין בצורכי החולה.

The Rambam (ibid.) writes that the reason for not visiting during the early part of the day is that in the morning his needs are being attended to (as is the practice of modern hospitals, where doctors make their rounds and supervise patient treatment in the mornings).

However, if one is only able to visit at these times because of other commitments, it is better to go then, rather than not to go at all (Ahavat Chesed 3:3).

Ideally, visits should be planned in accordance with the patient’s schedule and/or the visiting hours allowed by the hospital. Some hospitals will allow one to visit outside of visiting hours if the patient says he needs the visitor, and if the hospital is not particular about enforcing visiting hours, then one may go outside of these times (heard from Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits).

Of course, if one has no choice, one can fulfill this mitzvah by sending a message or a letter, or even calling on the telephone (heard from Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, based on Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 335:8; Ahavat Chesed 3:3; Igrot Moshe, Yoreh Deah 223).

The following story is an example of how a well-timed visit can make all the difference.

*It happened that one of the prominent rabbis of Jerusalem fell ill and was bedridden for many months. He could no longer go to shul nor make any public appearances. After a while, the great Sephardi kabbalist, Chacham Mutzafi (1900-1974) began to visit the rabbi every Friday night on his way home from shul. He would spend a few minutes with the rabbi, discussing the pressing issues of the day and getting his advice about questions that arose during the week.*

*After a number of weeks during which he made these Friday night visits, some of his family members asked Chacham Mutzafi, “Why do you go and visit the rabbi on Friday nights? The family has to wait a few minutes for you to come home. The rabbi is at home every day and every night of the week. Why not visit him in the middle of the week?”*

*Chacham Mutzafi replied, “I am sure that on Friday night the rabbi has fond memories of his younger years. In years gone by, every Friday night this rabbi would walk home accompanied by many congregants. He would share words of wisdom with them, and discuss questions of halachah about which he had been consulted.”*

*“Now being sick,” continued Chacham Mutzafi, “he has none of that honor. Friday night must be the saddest time of the week for him. For what he had, he no longer has. It is for this reason that I spend a few minutes to go and cheer him up specifically at this time.” (Rabbi Paysach Krohn, Around the Maggid’s Table, p. 74.)*

One of the hardest things about being sick is not being able to participate in one’s normal life. How does the CEO feel when he cannot attend executive meetings due to illness? Or how does the injured sportsman feel when he knows that his team is playing without him? What about the college student sick in the dormitory, feeling isolated knowing his friends are together without him? These are times when one’s visit is especially appreciated and reflects compassion for the patient.

**PART C. ONE MAY VISIT MANY TIMES A DAY****1. Talmud Bavli, Nedarim 39b – One may visit many times a day. One should even visit someone who is of a lesser stature than oneself.**

“The mitzvah of visiting the sick has no limit.”  
With regard to what does it have “no limit”?

[There are two explanations.] Abaye said, “Even an individual of greater standing should visit someone of lesser stature.”

Rava said, “One should visit the sick person even a hundred times a day [i.e. as much as necessary].”

ביקור חולים אין לה שיעור. מאי אין לה שיעור...

אמר אביי אפילו גדול אצל קטן

רבא אמר אפילו מאה פעמים ביום

One may visit the patient many times a day. Indeed, it is praiseworthy to do so, as long as it does not bother the patient and it is for his benefit (Rambam, Hilchot Aveil 14:4).

**PART D. TO SIT ON THE SAME LEVEL OR LOWER THAN THE PATIENT****1. Talmud Bavli, Nedarim 40a – The Divine Presence rests above the head of the patient.**

Rabin said in the name of Rav, “From where do we know that the Divine Presence is to be found above the head of the sick person? From the verse that states, ‘God will support him on the bed of illness’ (Tehillim/Psalms 41:4).”

Similarly, it has been taught: One who comes to visit a sick person should not sit on a bed, chair or bench; rather, he should wrap himself and sit on the floor, for the Divine Presence is to be found above the sick man, as it is written, “God will support him on the bed of illness.”

אמר רבין אמר רב מנין שהשכינה שרויה למעל מראשותיו של חולה שנאמר ה' יסעדנו על ערש דוי.

תניא נמי הכי: הנכנס לבקר את החולה לא ישב לא על גבי מטה ולא על ע"ג ספסל ולא על ע"ג כסא אלא מתעטף ויושב על ע"ג קרקע מפני שהשכינה שרויה למעלה מומתו של חולה שנאמר ה' יסעדנו על ערש דוי.

**2. Ran, ibid. – Out of respect for the Divine Presence, one should not sit higher than the patient.**

There are those who interpret this teaching as referring to a scenario in which the patient himself is on the floor. In this case, were the visitor to sit on a chair or the like he would find himself above the patient's head.

ר"ן: איכא מ"ד דהיינו דוקא כשהחולה שוכב על ע"ג קרקע דא"כ נמצא יושב גבוה מן החולה.

It is a mitzvah to sit with the patient and keep him company. If the patient is lying on the floor, the visitor should not sit on a chair that is higher than his head. If the patient is lying on a bed, however, it is fine to sit on a chair or bench (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 335:5).

## PART E. GUIDING THE PATIENT TOWARD SPIRITUAL GROWTH

1. **Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 335:7**

We tell the patient that he should make sure his financial affairs are in order, i.e. to make accounting of monies that he lent or deposited with others, or that others lent or deposited with him. However, one must be careful not to make him afraid that he is going to die.

אומרים לו שיתן דעתו על ענייניו, אם הלוח או הפקיד  
אצל אחרים, או אחרים הלוח או הפקידו אצלו, ואל  
יפחד מפני זה מהמות.

A person afflicted with a serious illness should pay extra attention not to leave this world with unfinished affairs. To take care of such matters could be a mitzvah; and adding to one's treasury of mitzvot – along with good deeds and prayer – is a merit for life (Journey to Virtue, 57:29; Shabbat 32a).

2. **Chofetz Chaim, Ahavat Chesed 3:3 (footnote)– Inspire the patient to introspect and improve.**

One who visits a sick person should tend to both his physical and spiritual needs ... Regarding his spiritual needs: the visitor should gently inspire the patient to do *teshuvah* [literally, “return” – changing one's character and behavior for the better], to introspect and improve his ways. [However, by doing so, one must be careful not to make him afraid that he is going to die.]

המבקר את החולה ראוי לו שיפקח בצרכי החולה  
בגוף ונפש... בנפש – לעורר אותו לתשובה שיפשפש  
במעשיו...

## KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV.

- ∞ Every mitzvah in the Torah is specifically designed to educate us regarding higher levels of awareness and sensitivity. Visiting the sick is no different.
- ∞ The Torah's guidelines help us consider the emotional state of the patient, as he could be embarrassed by his condition and would rather not have visitors. The guidelines also help determine what time of day to visit and what we should talk about with the patient.
- ∞ The Torah requires us to assess the patient's physical, emotional, and spiritual situation with sensitivity before acting – to leave the box of our own subjectivity and really *think* about the other person.
- ∞ One of the hardest things about being sick is not being able to participate in one's normal life. How does the CEO feel when he cannot attend executive meetings due to illness? Or how does the injured sportsman feel when he knows that his team is playing without him? What about the college student sick in the dormitory, feeling isolated knowing his friends are together without him? These are times when one's visit is especially appreciated and reflects compassion for the patient.

## SECTION V. THE REWARD FOR VISITING THE SICK

The Talmud teaches us that visiting the sick is one of the rare mitzvot for which a person is rewarded in this world, as well as in the World to Come (Shabbat 127a). What are the rewards in this world?

### 1. Talmud Bavli, Nedarim 40a – The four rewards for visiting the sick: protection from one’s Evil Inclination and from suffering, and gaining honor and true friends.

What is the reward of one who visits the sick?

1. God will protect him from the Evil Inclination.
2. God will protect him from suffering.
3. He will be honored by all.
4. He will have acquaintances that are true friends.

ואם ביקר מה שכרו...

ה' ישמרהו מיצה"ר

ויחיהו מן היסורים...

שיהו הכל מתכבדין בו....

שיזדמנו לו ריעים...

In the next sources, the Chofetz Chaim and Maharal explain the reasons for these specific forms of reward.

### 2. Chofetz Chaim, Ahavat Chesed, 3:3 (footnote) – The visitor is rewarded “measure for measure.”

The three rewards for visiting the sick as based on the principle of “measure for measure:”

One who visits a sick person should tend to his physical and spiritual needs. He tends to the patient’s physical needs by taking care of his medical needs. He attends to his spiritual needs by gently guiding the patient to introspect and improve his ways ...

1. Because he improved the patient’s spiritual well-being, his spiritual well-being will also be secure – he will be saved from the Evil Inclination.
2. Because he looked after the other’s physical needs, he will be rewarded in the physical realm by being saved from suffering.
3. And because he may have compromised his status and honor by visiting someone of a lesser status than himself, his reward is that he will be honored by all.

אלו הג' דברים המה מדה כנגד מדה

דהנה המבקר את החולה ראוי לו שיפקח בצרכי החולה בגוף ונפש. בגוף – בצרכי רפואתו. בנפש – לעורר אותו לתשובה שיפשפש במעשיו...

בעבור שהביא את החולה שישוב בתשובה ישמרהו ה' מיצה"ר.

ובעבור שהביאו לבריאות הגוף יחיהו מן היסורים.

ובעבור שהקל בכבודו ואף שהיה גדול הלך אל החולה שקטן ממנו... יהיה מאושר בארץ שהכל מתכבדין בו.

### 3. Maharal, Netivot Olam, Netiv Gemilut Chassadim, Ch. 4 – The visitor receives similar benefits to those that he gives the sick person.

The visitor has acted in the spirit of true companionship by visiting his friend, so he deserves to merit true friends [who will treat him in the same manner].

מפני שנהג בו מנהג הריעים וחברים שהולכים לבקר זה את זה ... ולכך יזדמנו לו ריעים טובים...

## KEY THEMES OF SECTION V.

- ⌘ God's behavior toward people mirrors their own actions. In this way man takes the lead in his relationship with God. As Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner explains, the verse "God is your shade" (Tehillim 121:5), can be understood as "God is your shadow." Just as a shadow mimics a person, so God's conduct toward someone varies according to the person himself (Nefesh HaChaim 1:7).
- ⌘ This principle of reflection in Divine Providence is known as "measure for measure" (*midah k'neged midah*). If a person is kind and forgiving toward others, God Himself is kind and forgiving toward this person.
- ⌘ This principle finds clear expression in the mitzvah of visiting the sick. It is as if God encourages us to follow in His ways, and thus God gives the visitor the very same benefits that the visitor gives his sick friend – spiritual rejuvenation, physical health, honor, and true friendship.

## ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING & SOURCES

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### Other Mitzvot That May Apply

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, Ohr Yisrael, Ch. 31, s.v. *v'hinei hamishpat*

### The Importance of Visiting the Sick

Rabbeinu Yonah on Pirkei Avot 3:17

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur, Vol. I, pp. 252-254

### Additional Sources

Chofetz Chaim: Loving Kindness – Daily lessons in the power of giving, Rabbi Fischel Schachter and Chana Nestlebaum, ArtScroll.

Visiting the Sick, A halachic and medical guide, Rabbi Dr. Aaron Glatt, ArtScroll

The Healing Visit, by Chana Shofnos and Bat Tova Zwebner (Targum/Feldheim)