

ביקור חולים

Bikkur Holim

The *Mitzvah* of Visiting the Sick



A H.E.L.P. Booklet

Home Education Library Project

Beth El Synagogue

Omaha, Nebraska

The word *mitzvah* means “command,” although it is sometimes incorrectly translated as “good deed.” There are many *mitzvot* which serve only a ritual function while some *mitzvot* encompass fulfilling a ritual command while doing a good deed. The *mitzvah* of *bikkur holim*, visiting the sick, is a classic example of the kind of action which is both a *mitzvah* and a good deed.

This *mitzvah* has been considered an honored part of our tradition since its earliest days. In the *Midrash*, the rabbis explain that God visited Abraham, thereby setting an example for observance. The reason for this emphasis is simple to understand. As long as people are sick, there is a need to help ease their pain, both physical and spiritual. When we take the time to visit those who are ill, we bring healing to patients, and support to all who help them.

Our tradition teaches that each visitor takes some of the sickness from a patient. Therefore, when this *mitzvah* is followed appropriately, we help bring healing. This *mitzvah* should be part of what everyone in the congregation takes as a personal obligation. It should not be left for just the clergy to do.

As with all *mitzvot*, the rabbis provide guidance to those who wish to fulfill this *mitzvah*. With the abbreviated hospital stays and longer home convalescence typical today, keeping these guidelines in mind will be helpful to both patient and visitor.

- The purpose of visiting the sick is to cheer them and make them feel better. Don't bring bad news, complaints or your personal sadness with you. If you are feeling even slightly sick yourself, do not visit in person.
- Check with the nursing station before visiting at the hospital; heed any signs on a patient's door. Before you visit someone at home, it is best to call ahead to set a specific time to visit. Just "dropping in" might bring a visit during a procedure or after a bad night's rest. If the patient prefers no visitors, don't take it personally. Just try again another time. Sometimes a telephone call is exactly the right way to visit.
- Don't come either too early or too late in the day. The rabbis suggested midday as the best time to visit, and that was before the days of exhausting tests and procedures!
- When visiting, don't hover over the bed, sit on the bed or remain too far away. Try to be within easy seeing and hearing distance so the patient may remain in a restful position during your visit.

- Keep visits short. Ten minutes is a reasonable amount of time for a visit in the hospital, up to twenty minutes for a home visit. Remember that the purpose of a patient's convalescing is to heal, not to entertain those who have come to visit. While having people stop by can be helpful, too long a visit can be exhausting for the patient.
- Remember, too, that the patient probably isn't feeling well. Don't expect the usual perky personality. Don't be surprised if, even after a short time, you sense it's time to go. Watch for signs that weariness is setting in and act accordingly. Don't put the patient into the uncomfortable position of needing to ask you to go.
- Ask, especially once someone is back at home, if you can help out by shopping, doing some light house cleaning or running errands. Offer to sit in another room to answer the phone or door to allow time for uninterrupted rest. But offer help only if you mean it.
- Providing meals for immediate use or to be frozen can be a wonderful help. Keep special dietary issues, in addition to issues of *kashrut*, in mind while preparing the meals. Beth El has a stock of "*mitzvah* meals." Those are meals ready for pick up or delivery to help support a family during the stressful times of illness. Contact Rabbi Drazen for information.
- Be considerate of the patient's feelings. Avoid asking questions of a personal nature about the illness, plans for treatment, therapy or reconstructive surgery. Ask only questions which you would not find uncomfortable if they were asked of you. But, remember that during illness or following surgery a person may be particularly sensitive or self-conscious.
- Honor the patient's right to privacy. Share details of a person's con-

dition, prognosis or care only with specific permission and consent. Even if it's okay to share, be careful to be precise.

- *Siddur Sim Shalom* has a liturgy for healing in the daily amidah (see page 113). It's appropriate to say that selection or other words of prayer for recovery when visiting. Beth El sends prayers for recovery to hospitalized members which can be read together as well.

At Beth El, we recite a special *mi-she-barakh* for the sick each Shabbat morning. Names of those in the hospital (who have allowed their hospitalization to be public) and names called to the synagogue office by noon Friday are included on the list. *Please be sure your patient doesn't mind being included.*

The *mitzvah* of *bikkur holim* is one of the *mitzvot* for which, according to the tradition, we are rewarded both in this world and the next world (see *Siddur Sim Shalom* page 9). With these suggestions, we can do our small part to help the healing process for all who are ill.

Another H.E.L.P. Booklet
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