

## ***Bikur Cholim Over the Long Haul:***

### **Challenges and Opportunities with Chronic Illness**

#### Some Materials for Our Exploration

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Workshop at

#### ***Turn to Me: Faces and Phases of Bikur Cholim***

#### **19<sup>th</sup> Annual Bikur Cholim Conference**

Rabbi Isaac N. Trainin Bikur Cholim Coordinating Council,  
The Rita J. Kaplan Jewish Connections Programs of the  
Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services

November 12, 2006/21 Heshvan 5767

#### **UJA-Federation of New York**

130 East 59<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York City

Several women were visiting elderly Mrs. Diamond, who was very ill. After a while, they rose to leave, and told her, "Esther, we will keep you in our prayers." "Just wash the dishes in the kitchen," the ailing woman said. "I can do my own praying."  
*Alan King's Great Jewish Joke Book (NY: Crown Publishers, 2002) page 42*

An elderly man went to the doctor complaining of aches and pains all over his body. After a thorough examination, the doctor gives him a clean bill of health. "Hymie, you're in fine shape for an eighty-year-old. After all, I'm not a magician – I can't make you any younger," said the doctor. "Who asked you to make me younger? Just make sure I get older!"  
*Alan King's Great Jewish Joke Book (NY: Crown Publishers, 2002, page 96)*

**On the Obligation of the Physician to Render Medical Care:  
Hashavat Aveidot/The Restoration of That Which is Lost**

"If you see your fellow's ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it; you must take it back to your fellow. If your fellow does not live near you or you do not know who he is, you shall bring it home and it shall remain with you until your fellow claims it; then **you shall restore it to him**. You shall do the same with his ass; you shall do the same with his garment; and so too shall you do with anything that your fellow loses and you find: you may not hide yourself..."

*(Deuteronomy 22:1-3)*

**Maimonides**, a physician in the twelfth century, uses this as the basis of a binding religious obligation to render medical care.

"It is obligatory from the Torah for the physician to heal the sick and this is included in the explanation of the scriptural phrase '**and you shall restore it to him,**' meaning to heal his body..."

*Maimonides, Commentary on the Mishnah, Nedarim 4:4;  
also in Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 336*

**Strengthening the Vital Powers**

In order to strengthen the vital powers,  
one should employ musical instruments  
and tell patients gay stories which will make the heart swell  
and narratives that will distract the mind  
and cause them and their friends to laugh...

*Maimonides, The Preservation of Youth, 12th cty.*

**Medicine for the Soul**

If a physician cannot give a patient medicine for the body,  
he should somehow find and give medicine for the patient's soul.

*Zohar*

**Denial of God**

Even the denial of God can serve God.  
If a person should come to you and ask for help,  
you should not put him off with pious words, saying,  
"Have faith and take your troubles to God,"  
but you should act as if there were no God at all,  
as if there was only one person in the world  
who could help this person --  
yourself.

*Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov, 1745-1807*

**Night-Side of Life**

"Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place."

*Susan Sontag*

**Tzelem Elokim/Human as the Image of God:**

***Some Jewish Quotes***

And God created humans in God's image...

*Genesis 1:27*

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground,  
and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

*Genesis 2:7*

Human was created as a single individual  
to teach you that anyone who destroys a single soul is as though he destroyed an entire world,  
and anyone who preserves a single soul is as though he preserved an entire world;

and to preserve peace/harmony among creatures,

so that one person not say to the next,

“my father is greater than your father,”

or as some might say,

“there are multiple powers in heaven.”

And to show the greatness of the Holy Blessed One,  
for while a person stamps many coins from a single mold,  
and all that are produced come out alike,  
the King of Kings, the Holy Blessed One,  
has stamped every person with the mold of the first Adam,  
yet not one of them is like his fellow.

And so, each and every individual is obligated to say,

“For my sake was the world created....”

*Mishnah Sanhedrin, 4:5*

Beloved is human who was created in the divine image.

*Rabbi Akiva, quoted in Mishnah Avot 3:14*

To whom did David refer in the 5 verses beginning with

‘Bless the Lord, O my soul’ (*Psalms 104*)?

He was alluding only to the Holy Blessed One, and to the soul.

Just as the Holy Blessed One fills the whole world, so the soul fills the body.

Just as the Holy Blessed One sees but is not seen, so the soul sees but is not itself seen.

Just as the Holy Blessed One feeds the whole world, so the soul feeds the whole body.

Just as the Holy Blessed One is pure, so the soul is pure.

Just as the Holy Blessed One abides in the innermost precincts,

so the soul abides in the innermost precincts.

Let that which has these five qualities come and praise Him who has these five qualities.

*Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 10a*

Everything which came into being was alternately formed of heaven and earth.

When the time came to create human,

there was a tie between the terrestrial and the celestial creatures.

God therefore made human's soul of heaven and his body of earth.

In so doing, God established the harmony of the universe.

*Paraphrase of Sifre Deuteronomy 306*

Human is preceded on the road by a company of angels who proclaim:

‘Make way for the Image of the Holy Blessed One!’

*Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, in Midrash T'hillim 55:19, about Psalms 17:7*

Workshop handout, *Turn to Me: Faces and Phases of Bikur Cholim*

19<sup>th</sup> Annual Bikur Cholim Conference

Rabbi Isaac N. Trainin Bikur Cholim Coordinating Council

Antoninus said to Rabbi: 'The body and the soul can both free themselves from judgment! The body can plead: The soul has sinned, [the proof being] that from the day it left me I lie like a dumb stone in the grave [totally powerless]. While the soul can say: The body has sinned, [the proof being] that from the day I departed from it I fly about in the air like a bird [commit no sin].'

Rabbi replied, 'I will tell you a parable. To what may this be compared? To a human king who owned a beautiful orchard which contained splendid figs. Now, he appointed two watchmen therein, one lame and the other blind. [One day] the lame man said to the blind, "I see beautiful figs in the orchard. Come and take me upon thy shoulder, that we may procure and eat them." So the lame bestrode the blind, procured and ate them. Some time after, the owner of the orchard came and inquired of them, "Where are those beautiful figs?" The lame man replied, "Have I then feet to walk with?" The blind man replied, "Have I then eyes to see with?" What did he do? He placed the lame upon the blind and judged them together. So will the Holy Blessed One, bring the soul, [re]place it in the body, and judge them together, as it is written, "He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, that he may judge his people." (*Psalm 50:4*) He shall call to the heavens from above-this refers to the soul; and to the earth, that he may judge his people-to the body.'

*Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 91a-b*

Man is the axis of the world and its foundation....

Though his body be small, his soul is larger than heaven and earth,  
for through it he reaches even what is above them and the cause of them,  
the Creator Himself.

*Sa'adia, b. Egypt 880, one of the last G'onim in his philosophic classic, Emunot v'De'ot 4:1-2*

One who sees...people with disfigured faces or limbs, recites the blessing,  
"Blessed are You, Adonai our God, King of the universe,  
who makes people different."

*Rambam/Maimonides (1135-1204 CE), Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Berakhot 10:12,  
based on the Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 58b.*

Because of the divine image...man is superior even to the angels.

*Judah Loew, Derekh HaHayim, 1589*

The symbol of God is man, every man.

God created man in His image (*tselem*), in His likeness (*demut*)...

Human life is holy, holier even than the Scrolls of the Torah.

*Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Symbolism and Jewish Faith" (1954)*

People often perceive themselves in terms of their constraints as mortal beings.

Yet there are times that call for transcendent actions.

One must at times do more than one can possibly do,

for each mortal is endowed with a G\*dly soul,

and G\*d transcends mortal constraints."

*-Rebbe Menahem Mendel Schneerson*

Everyone must have two pockets,

so that s/he can reach into the one or the other, according to his/her needs:

In the right pocket are to be the words -

"For my sake was the world created" (*Mishnah Sanhedrin, 4:5*)

and in the left -

"I am dust and ashes" (*Genesis 18:27*)

*Hassidic commentary on Genesis 18:27, quoted in Nahum Glatzer's Ten Rungs*

***Bikkur Holim/Reaching Out to Those Who Are Ill***  
**Excerpts of Some Classical Jewish Guidance/Insight**

Five excerpts from texts concerning ***bikkur holim***, the Jewish tradition/approach to reaching out to those who are ill:  
(Please note: *All emphases added!*)

1. R. Hama son of R. Hanina further said:  
"What does the text (*Deut. 13:5*) 'You shall walk after the Lord your God' mean? Is it really possible for a human being to walk after the *Shekhinah* (God's Presence) -- has it not also been said (*Deut. 4:24*), 'For the Lord your God is a devouring fire!'  
"The meaning is: Walk after the attributes of the Holy Blessed One.  
"As God clothes the naked -- for it is written (*Genesis 3:21*), 'And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin and clothed them'-- so should you also clothe the naked.  
"As the Holy Blessed One visits the sick -- for it is written (*Genesis 18:1*), 'And the Lord appeared unto him by the oaks of Mamre' -- so should you also visit the sick.  
"The Holy Blessed One comforts mourners -- for it is written (*Genesis 25:11*), 'And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son' -- so should you also comfort mourners.  
"The Holy Blessed One buries the dead -- for it is written (*Deut. 34:6*) 'And he buried him in the valley' -- so should you also bury the dead."  
*(Talmud, Sotah 14a)*
  
2. It was taught: There is no measure for visiting the sick  
....  
R. Abba son of R. Hanina said, "He who visits an individual who is sick takes away one sixtieth of his/her pain." The Sages replied, "If so, let sixty people visit and restore the person to health!?" He replied, "The sixtieth is analogous to the one tenth discussed by Rabbi Judah HaNassi's, and this, providing that the visitor is of the same affinity. A daughter who enjoys maintenance from her brothers' estate receives one tenth of the estate for a dowry when she marries." Rabbi Judah HaNassi's disciples asked, "If so, what if a man leaves ten daughters and one son -- the son would receive nothing from the estate!" Rabbi Judah HaNassi clarified: "The first to marry receives a tenth of the estate; the second, a tenth of what remains; the third, a tenth of what remains after that, and so on...."  
R. Huna taught that if sixty people came all at once to visit a sick person, they could indeed restore him to health, but only if they loved him like themselves....  
*(adapted from Talmud, Nedarim 39b  
& Midrash, Leviticus Rabbah 34:1)*

3. When visiting the sick one should not sit on a bed or on a chair or on a bench nor in any high place (i.e., higher than the patient) nor above the head of his bed, But one should wrap oneself up (*mit'ateif*, i.e., cloak oneself in a way connoting focus/purpose, as in prayer) and sit below the head of the bed and request divine mercy on the patient's behalf (*um'vakkesh alav rahamim*) and (only then) leave.  
(Maimonides, 1135-1204 CE; *Mishneh Torah: Hilkhos Aveilus/The Laws of Mourning, Chapter 14, Section VI*)
4. "When a person becomes ill it is a *mitzvah* for every person to visit, for we find that the Holy Blessed One visits the sick, as our Sages of Blessed Memory (*Talmud, Bava Metzia 86b*) explained the verse (*Genesis 18:1*) "And God appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre..." teaching us that God came to visit Abraham when he was sick. Relatives and friends who are accustomed to visit this individual often should go to visit as soon as they hear of the illness. But strangers/casual acquaintances should not visit immediately but should wait until three days have passed so as not to deter his chances of recovery by labelling him a 'sick person.' If, however, one became suddenly ill, even strangers should visit him immediately. Even a 'great' man should visit a less 'important' person, even many times a day. He who visits the sick frequently is praiseworthy, providing he should not become troublesome to the one who is ill...  
(*Kitzur Shulhan Arukh*, 1800's; Chapter 193/1)
5. The essence of the *mitzvah* to visit the sick is to attend to the needs of the patient, to see to what has to be done for him/her, and to ensure the ease/comfort/pleasure of his/her company (make him/her at peace with family and friends) also to consider his/her condition and to pray for mercy on his/her behalf. If you visited a sick person and did not pray for mercy, you have not fulfilled the *mitzvah*...  
(*ibid.*, *Kitzur Shulhan Arukh*, Chapter 193/3)

What I needed:

\* I needed to learn how to be sick without suffering. It is entirely possible, but I needed to be taught.

\* I needed to understand that I was not helpless the way I thought I was: that I could take control of many aspects of my illness and my life despite the fact that I could not control my diseases.

\* I needed to know that I was not alone: I needed a community.

\* I needed to express my rage so that I could replace it with peace.

I was fortunate to find solace in many places and people, and to piece together a quilt of comfort. It was raggedy and incomplete, but I kept on stitching. Then I met Rabbi Weintraub and joined his Jewish Spiritual Support Group, where I was able to marry my inchoate search for spiritual consolation with active textual study. The quilt began to keep out the cold.

What you could do:

\* End the silence. Bring illness out into the open.

\* Ask me. Don't exclude me or make assumptions about what I need.

\* Listen. Don't try to make "it" better before you know what "it" is.

\* Don't staunch tears. Don't be afraid of tears or rage; respect them. Don't see them as an accusation or a failure, but as the soul's expression of what lies deeper than words.

\* Teach me how to pray -- not just "nice" prayers, but prayers that rise out of my rage, my loss, my paralysis.

\* Try to understand that when illness walks in the door, praise flies out the window -- at least for a while.

\* Discuss what is alienating in the weekly Torah portions; don't just glide over it. Discuss and interpret them with me, trying to find ways to find a deeper truth than may be apparent on the page. Or . . .

\* Challenge with me those places in Torah which seem to exclude me or set me up for punishment: that exclude me as imperfect even though I am still made in the image of God: where I am not allowed to approach the altar; when God seems to punish Miriam for challenging Moses; you must know many others.

\* Find other teachings more appropriate -- "He will cover you with His wings; /In His shelter you will find refuge. Fear not the terror by night or the arrow that flies by day,/the pestilence that stalks in darkness/or the plague that rages at noon.../You will step on cubs and cobras/tread safely on lions and serpents...." I'm sure you know more.

\* Don't TELL me what my illness means to me. It will never work, and it will never comfort. Find out what illness DOES mean to me, and explore it with me without trying to change my mind.

\* Help me understand that Judaism doesn't want me to be alone in illness, and give me examples.

\* Help my family -- please help my family: food, errands, help with trips to hospital and doctors, baby-sitting. If you think your life is busy, imagine what it's like with illness in the house.

\* If I don't have a family, be one for me.

And above all --

\* Help me -- or let me help you -- refine the differences between curing and healing. If I don't understand the difference between healing and curing, I will think that God isn't paying attention to me, or is truly punishing me, or has turned away and doesn't care about me.

I personally feel healed -- most of the time -- even though I have two chronic, painful, potentially life-threatening diseases that are incurable. Perhaps you can help other people discover this. As a spiritual ally, you can help me continue to heal.

\* Let the healing be mutual. You can learn a lot from people who are struggling -- we can go into the darkness and bring back light. Listen.

And a few new thoughts:

Listening -- really hearing -- is essential.

Your tears are a gift.

Your silence can be a gift.

Not-knowing what to say can be a gift.

Saying you don't know what to say is a gift: because mumbling platitudes is a slap in the face, and a push back into the darkness of being alone in the pit.

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