



Ask The Organizer -Hands of the Jewish Community

Bikur Cholim Conference November 2007

BCCC/JBFCS, NYC

Simple Steps for Organizing or Invigorating a Bikur Cholim Program

Susan J. Rosenthal, LCSW, National Center for Jewish Healing, JBFCS

www.ncjh.org info@ncjh.org

Handout 1 -

“We are wondering why we have a list of trained volunteers ready to perform the mitzvah of Bikur Cholim and very few people in our synagogue who request or are referred for help.” A common statement from many Synagogue Bikur Cholim Committees

I. Overview: How Does A Synagogue Get *Bikur Cholim* to Work Well Within its Community?

A. Culture: Within the Synagogue Community - Information Gathering to address the need for informal and formal approaches.

Responding/Visiting/Inquiring - depends on knowing someone in the community is ill. It is linked to the ongoing process of creating an atmosphere that encourages ill people and their family and friends to ask for help and for people to notice and respond.

- Do members know what *Bikur Cholim* is?
(Common issue: In many communities, this tradition has been lost and is being retrieved. It requires ongoing education and marketing to change culture)
- To what extent does a helping response occur naturally in this community? How can this be strengthened?
(Common issues: lay committees, *havurahs*, singles, Hebrew school parents, people who sit together at synagogue, can benefit for education about the mitzvah in order to change norms— inquire. Use education about *Shiva minyans* as a model)



- When do ill members/family/friends *Call Out of Help*? What are the barriers?
(Common issues: Denial, fear, stigma, confidentiality, counter-culture, unaware of resource)
- Do ill members know whom to inform and how to do this? Do they contact the Rabbinic Office or other members of the community? Do they know what to expect as a response? (Common issues: No idea where to turn and what to expect)
- Do members act as the *Eyes and Ears* for each other, the Rabbis and Bikur Cholim Committee? Do members know who to inform when they learn someone needs help?
(Common issues: Not sure who to go to with their concern/ knowledge of the process or possible outcomes, work on community norms)
- Do members *expect* the Rabbis and members to be mind readers, know they are ill, and then get disappointed when they don't get an adequate response?
(Common response: Often times, yes. This is why ongoing community education is important)
- What vehicles exist to support/ increase awareness of the mitzvah?
(Common options: *Mi Sheberakh* list and *Aliyah*; *Shabbat D'var*; educating committee chairs and *Havurahs*; educational brochures; newsletter articles, website, *MiSheberakh* Cards)

B. Formal Systems – Building a Vision and a Committee

(See separate handout for a step-guide to Visioning and Committee Development)

- A visioning/ planning process can produce a blueprint for a structure tailored to the unique profile and goals of each synagogue
- People skills helpful to the *Vision Process* include community organizing/ strategic planning and psychosocial spiritual knowledge. Recruit people from within the synagogue community to help with the process. Could be a short term commitment.



- Strive to include representatives from different constituencies from the synagogue in the visioning group.
- You want someone from the Rabbinic Office as an ongoing part of the *Visioning Process*
- **Visioning typically focuses on evolving strategies for:**
 - developing a strong and ongoing partnership between lay and Rabbis (and professional staff)
 - building a well conceived Bikur Cholim Leadership Committee
 - reducing barriers to members “calling out for help”
 - increasing awareness of how those in need of assistance can access *Bikur Cholim*
 - educating and mobilizing naturally occurring relationships within the synagogue

C. Collaboration: Between Rabbis and Lay Leaders/Professional Staff/Members

In order for the Mitzvah to be offered in a timely and effective manner, Rabbis, lay volunteers and professionals need to build an integrated and efficient team.

- How does the Rabbi (s) / Rabbinic Office respond to the needs of its members who are ill? What is the range of responses?
(Common responses: May be a spontaneous, ad hoc system to a formal tracking system. Who does what?)
- What constraints does the Rabbi(s) wrestle with in addressing this mitzvah?
(Common responses: Time constraints, confidentiality, burnout, member’s expectations)



- How does the Rabbi involve lay members in meeting the needs of those who are ill? Which aspects of this system are formalized? What about the informal system?
(Common responses: Informal - a few trusted people; friends of the ill person; formal- BH Committees; Involve head of Rabbinic Office, secretaries)
- What does the Rabbi (s) see as the down side to involving lay leaders in responding to the needs of the ill?
(Common responses: More demands, confidentiality, competence, time to coordinate)
- What does the Rabbi (s) see as the up side to involving lay leaders?
(Common responses: More connected, empowered community, spirit of the mitzvah (1/60th), more hands and diverse skills, Rabbi extenders, share the care)
- Are current Bikur Cholim lay leaders committed to decentralizing (involving as many members as possible) in the mitzvah? What are the barriers here?
(Common responses: Likes special relationship with Rabbi, even if burnt out; in group/out group)
- What are the ways a common vision and progressive partnership can be built between Rabbinate and Lay Leaders?
(Common Responses: Rabbinic liaison; active participation in *Vision*; understanding structure, commitment to an ongoing- process)



BIKUR HOLIM KIDDUSH: “CALLING OUT FOR HELP”

AN INTRODUCTION

WHAT THE TALMUD TELLS US ABOUT BIKKUR HOLIM

These are the deeds which have no measure...and which yield immediate fruit and continue to yield fruit in time to come: honoring parents; doing deeds of loving kindness; attending the house of study punctually, morning and evening; providing hospitality; **visiting the sick**; helping the needy bride; attending the dead; probing the meaning of prayer; making peace between one person and another, and between man and wife. And the study of Torah is the most basic of them all. (Based upon Shabbat 127A)

WHAT WE'RE DOING AT ____

The ____ Bikur Holim Committee and volunteers make every effort to respond to a variety of needs that arise when individuals and families are challenged by illness. Volunteers help to coordinate and deliver the following activities:

- Visiting while people are in the hospital or are home bound
- Making phone calls to provide support to the ill and to members of the family
- Providing transportation to and from the hospital or special medical appointments
- Assisting with errands such as shopping and picking up necessities for people who are not able to get out themselves
- Conducting healing services for individuals challenged by serious illness or medical procedures
- Making pastoral counseling available
- Offering assistance in getting to synagogue

In addition, the Bikur Holim Committee provides ongoing learning opportunities (like today's Kiddush) to help us better understand the mitzvah and to build a stronger sacred community amongst volunteers and across the congregation. And we offer one-on-one and small group assistance to sustain the spirits of caregivers, family, and friends who are part of an ill person's support circle.

In our work together, the members of the Bikur Holim Committee try to identify, mobilize and organize family, friends and Bikur Holim volunteers so that each person can do "1/60th" — just a little — as our tradition teaches. When the intentions of a group of people are well coordinated, everyone experiences a multiplier effect — increasing several fold the power and potential of the helping hand.



TO VOLUNTEER TO HELP, OR TO REQUEST SERVICES OR SUPPORT Call the Bikur Holim voice mail at _____. Someone will return your call as quickly as possible.

Developed by the B'nai Jeshurun, NY, NY Bikur Cholim Committee, in collaboration with the JBFCFCS Synagogue Consultation Program. in 2002

A QUICK LIST OF DO'S & DON'TS FOR VISITING ILL PEOPLE

TO BE SHARED WITH TEAM MEMBERS VISITING THE ILL

IMPORTANT DO'S

- Do call ahead before making a visit, to ensure that you're going at a good time and to find out if there is anything that the ill person needs you to bring with you.
- Do schedule your visit so that it is not too early in the morning or too late in the afternoon or evening.
- Do make a point of following the ill person's lead in terms of conversation.
- Do focus on really listening and being present. (This will not only make it easier to follow the ill person's conversational lead...but it will also help you channel any anxiety that the visit may be stirring up for you and make it easier to quiet your own thoughts.)
- Do try to figure out how you can be of tangible assistance to the ill person and, if appropriate, to the ill person's family.
- Do bring a psalm, a poem, or a Mi Sheberakh prayer to say out loud or silently at the end of the visit. (Pray within the ill person's presence or, if he or she would be more comfortable, pray right after your visit.) (According to the tradition, a visit is not a visit unless we pray on the ill person's behalf.)

IMPORTANT DON'TS

- Don't get caught in the trap of giving easy answers or false assurances (e.g., "It will be okay." Instead, try something like, "I'm sorry that this is happening to you.")
- Don't put the ill person in the position of having to entertain you.
- Don't be afraid of silence. (If you're fully present and following the ill person's lead, your presence and patience can convey interest and support.)
- Don't initiate conversation about the illness.



- Don't comment on the ill person's apartment or décor.
- Don't sit on the ill person's bed. (Instead, position yourself at a comfortable distance from the person, where he or she can easily see you without strain.)
- Don't stay too long — ill people are usually tired, and visits can be taxing if they're prolonged.

Developed by the B'nai Jeshurun, NY, NY Bikur Cholim Committee.