

**Beth Chayim Chadashim,  
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**Vayera 5762**

**Bikur Cholim**

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It had been a long twenty four years. Abraham had left his homeland, traveled thousands of miles, split from his nephew, waged war with various enemies, rescued his nephew, deceived a king, heard many promises, watched his wife and his concubine bicker, watched his concubine grow big with his first child, changed names, and made an eternal covenant with God that involved the probably painful ritual of circumcision. Imagine how Abraham must have felt just after making that covenant. He was probably weary from his years of journey, most likely in pain from his circumcision, and he was facing a recovery process from the surgery that could not have been comfortable for a man living in the hot desert in a time before Advil. And he probably knew that after the wounds healed, he would face a long and arduous post-covenant life. We have the advantage of knowing just how full Abraham's life was after making the covenant- he argued with God on behalf of Sodom and Gemorrah, deceived another king, enjoyed the birth of Isaac to Sarah, his beloved wife, watched the seemingly unfair expulsion of his concubine Hagar and their son Ishmael, nearly sacrificed his son Isaac, his first-born whom he loved, and ultimately suffered through the death of Sarah and the resultant land negotiations. At age 99, Abraham could only imagine what was to come. Knowing what came, I am exhausted! It is no wonder that our Torah portion Vayera finds post-circumcision/post-covenantal Abraham sitting at the entrance of his tent as the day grew hot. He was uncomfortable, he was tired, and he had a lot on his mind with his trying past and unknown future.

If ever there was a case of a man who needed some care, Abraham was that man. And wouldn't you know it, three men appeared near him- a real Godsend. In fact, our parasha implies that those three men standing by Abraham's tent on that day of recovery actually were God, "And God appeared to him at the terebinths of Mamre, Vayera elav Adonai b'elonei Mamre." Our tradition teaches that God's visit to Abraham while he recovers from his surgery is the first instance of visiting the sick, the great mitzvah of bikur cholim.

Tonight is the best night of the year to make a mitzvah pitch, to use Abraham's story as a means of inspiring each of us to perform acts of bikur cholim, and to join the newly forming group of BCC congregants who will volunteer to do this precious mitzvah. The easiest argument for doing bikur cholim is that God did it and therefore we should follow suit. If we are created in God's image, b'tzelem Elohim, doesn't that mandate that we try to act as God does? It is a great thing, what God did for Abraham, but I don't honestly believe that this argument is always enough to get us all involved in bikur cholim. So, let's delve into it a bit more.

First, we can consider the common misconception that it is not okay to ask for help. It is

okay! We can always ask for help, especially when we are ill or injured. A friend recently spent several extended periods out of school. I got a funny feeling in my gut and called his house, and learned that he was in the hospital with very serious problems. When I called him, he said he didn't want to burden me with worry, and I told him that worry based on reality is not nearly as big a burden as the worry that stems from an overactive imagination. It took quite a bit of hounding from many of his friends before he accepted that he could indeed ask for visitors and for help without burdening anyone.

Now when I went to visit this friend, first at the hospital and later at home, he was a lot smarter than Abraham. When Abraham received his visitor(s), he jumped up and got to work washing their feet and fetching some food (as in, "Sarah honey, can you make up some cakes while I sacrifice and cook up this yummy calf"). That is not necessary! Sick and injured people get to relax. My friend stayed in bed in the hospital and sat at the table while I prepared lunch at his home, and he told me to leave when he was tired. That is okay! Without the ill, the cholim, no one can perform bikur cholim. When we are sick, we can actually enable the performance of a mitzvah by asking for help. We can control the limits of that help, and are welcome to request what we need! We have BCC forms for people who would like to request help. It's okay, even good, to fill one out.

There are other hurdles that we who visit the sick, must overcome. First and foremost, it is sometimes scary and often uncomfortable for us to be near sick people. Whether we are afraid of catching something, afraid of seeing what can happen to us, afraid that we won't be able to handle seeing a friend or loved one sick, that we'll break down and become a burden to the ill person, we all have reasons to be nervous about bikur cholim. Unlike God, we can't know exactly how things will turn out. We can only confront our fears and discomfort and push on. We may wonder if we will have anything to talk about, or whether the person whom we are visiting is dealing with anxiety, angst or doubt that we feel incapable of calming. We may also be unable to make a visit to someone. Perhaps our work schedules prevent it, perhaps we don't have transportation. There are numerous issues, some huge, some smaller, that could become barriers to bikur cholim, but if we recognize them and decide which barriers really will stop us and which ones we can move around, we can all be involved.

As BCC re-institutes its bikur cholim program (which was once incredibly strong and, from what I hear, practically self-sufficient), there will be many and varied opportunities to work through concerns about doing this mitzvah. There will be support groups for people who request visits, for people who make visits, for people whose lives are always touched by bikur cholim because they are constantly caring for an ill person. There will be study sessions where we can explore the various explanations of and inspirations for bikur cholim that we find in our written and oral Torahs. There will be programs for those who wish to develop some particular skills that are useful when visiting the sick. This will not include changing any medical equipment, and will include the art of sitting silently with a person, letting your mere presence serve as a comfort. This is a mitzvah that all of us can do, and none of us need to feel alone or unsupported when we do it.

In recent days, we have all actually been engaging in the acts that God and Abraham did so many years ago. When the sickening burden of September 11 fell upon us, we all became sick, like Abraham. We suffered from the pains of sorrow, of fear, of doubt. We sat at the doors of our modern day tents, thinking over our past, experiencing our present pain, and

wondering about our future. We were, and still are, the cholim.

And each of us, though sick ourselves, also acted as God did, b'tzelem Elohim. We entered into each other's sick places, and gave comfort. I don't know about you, but I was afraid of seeing other people's pain. I was horrified at the prospect of meeting someone who had lost a loved one. I thought I would be unable to control my emotions, and that I would have no idea what to say or do. In fact, when I did see the pain, and did meet that person, it was hard, but the reward of offering even my silent arms to people, so that they could feel wrapped in safety for just a minute... That reward was greater than my fear.

Right now, we have a model for bikur cholim who is far closer to us than Abraham. Our own rabbi is probably, as we speak, yawning as another day spent with her mother comes to an end. As you know, her mother is terminally ill, and Lisa has been by her side for nearly two weeks. Lisa asked that I use her experience as an example of the multi-layered benefits of bikur cholim. Though she is, of course, in deep pain as she watches her mother waste away each day, she takes enormous comfort in the fact that she is with her mother at all. In fact, it seems that her mom's still lively sense of humor is keeping Lisa afloat in her sea of sorrow. I haven't spoken with Mrs. Edwards, but I can imagine the daily joy she receives from seeing her children and family before her during the last days of her life. Lisa's doing bikur cholim is ensuring that, though her mother's body is growing weaker, her soul, and her heart, are still strong. Lisa's heart and soul will also survive this trial, in part because of the way that she is going through it, and in part because of the circle of support and comfort she knows she will find when she returns to us.

There are so many reasons to be involved in the mitzvah of bikur cholim, and so many ways to do so. As you peruse and sign the sign-up forms for bikur cholim, you'll see that there are options for involvement that range from making and receiving resource lists to making and receiving phone calls to making and receiving dinner to making and receiving hospital visits. There is a path for everyone. I'm choosing a path that works for me, now it's your turn to find the path that works for you.

God and Abraham, and the rabbis who understood their actions to be those of bikur cholim, gave us a gift on that hot desert afternoon. They showed us one of the first acts of divine and human kindness, and it is one that we can all do ourselves. Perhaps now more than ever, we need added blessings in our days. Bikur cholim is a way to give and receive those blessings. Indeed, this is a way to fulfill the words that God spoke to Abraham at the beginning of their relationship- be a blessing, v'heyeh bracha.