

On Bikkur Cholim

(Address at N.Y. Council for Bikkur Cholim)

I

It is a pleasure to greet all of you, and especially the living spirit of this very special group, Rabbi Isaac Trainin. His pioneering work on behalf of Bikkur Cholim as his post-retirement activity is sufficient testimony to his mental and spiritual health as well as to his health-mindedness. More power to him as a role model for all of us as to how to use one's time when the exigencies of career and the need to work for a living have released us from their ubiquitous claims.

II

We all know that *bikkur cholim* is a "mitzvah," a religious commandment in Judaism. But exactly where does it fit into the rubric of the 613 commandments?

Its technical categorization by Halakha (Jewish law) is a matter of dispute between two eminent halakhic authorities. One is a great decisor who flourished at the end of the Geonic period and is known as *Baal Halakhot Gedolot*, the author of a historic work by the name of *Halakhot Gedolot* ("the great compilation of laws") and is usually referred to by the acronym *Behag*. The other is the most distinguished name of medieval Sephardic Jewry, R. Moses ben Maimon--Maimonides or the Rambam. Maimonides assigns *bikkur cholim* to the mitzvah of "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," i.e., *bikkur cholim* is but one aspect of the more comprehensive injunction to love one's fellow human beings. His predecessor, Behag, however, holds that *bikkur cholim* is a separate and independent mitzvah, part of the general category of *chesed* or acts of loving kindness.

We can understand Maimonides: *bikkur cholim* obviously belongs with the mitzvah of love of fellow humans. But what of the Behag? If indeed *bikkur cholim* is an aspect of *chesed*, how does one distinguish between *chesed* and that other well known and oft discussed Jewish precept, *tzedakah*? If the former means love and concern for humans, is that not identical to the latter--for is not charity given to implement one's feeling of loving concern for the other? And if so, should not *bikkur cholim* be considered an aspect of *tzedakah*?

The answer is given in the Talmud: *Tzedakah* is a mitzvah reserved for the poor as beneficiaries, and it is effected by giving money or anything of monetary

value--such as food or clothing--to the poor. *Chesed*, however, is a mitzvah for both the poor and the rich (yes, the rich too often need love!), and can be performed both with money and with one's body or very self. It is, therefore, far more comprehensive than *tzedakah*. And that is the reason Behag assigns *bikkur cholim* to *chesed*: it is a mitzvah to visit the sick--not only to give material value to them, but the intangible yet far more significant gift of one's presence, oneself, and the mitzvah applies equally to the poor patient and the rich patient.

III

Now that we know the various views on the heading under which *bikkur cholim* belongs, we turn to a more formidable task: an analysis of the mitzvah itself. What are its constituent parts? What must one do in order to fulfill this commandment technically--or, better, properly?

The great halakhic figure and Bible commentator of Spanish Jewry following that of Maimonides was R. Moses ben Nachman, called Ramban (or Nachmanides). The Ramban identifies three distinct actions as constituting the mitzvah of *bikkur cholim*. They are: to tend to the needs of the patient; to pray for the patient's recovery and well-being; and to give the patient the gift of companionship--literally, "to enable the patient to obtain a restful spirit (*nachat ruach*) with his comrades." The first two are relatively straight forward. To help the patient turn to a better position or offer him/her medicine or water or otherwise nurse him is the fulfillment of the first requirement. Prayer is also simple to understand (but far less observed). Indeed, instead of just offering good wishes, actually *pray* for him or her! Don't be embarrassed--it is the right and proper thing to do and, if done seriously albeit briefly, the patient will genuinely appreciate it. During World War II (I don't remember WW I...) it was said that "there are no atheists in fox-holes." I believe the same can be said of hospital beds--especially in the intensive care units...

IV

Let us then concentrate on the third constituent of the mitzvah of *bikkur cholim* according to the Ramban. How does one bring *nachat ruach* to a patient? How do you relieve his or her anxiety, and what does it mean to give the patient the gift of companionship?

The Halakha actually gives us the precise wording of the greeting one should extend to the patient: *Ha-Makom yishlach lekha refuah shelemah be'tokh shear cholei yisrael*--"May the Almighty grant you a complete recovery among (or together with) all the sick of Israel." Note that this greeting is almost identical with the classical formal greeting used when consoling the mourner: "May the Almighty console you among (or together with) all the mourners of Zion and

Jerusalem." In both cases, the object of our concern is made to feel part of a larger community of sufferers--either patients or mourners. The patient, like the mourner, feels expelled from "normal" society--lonely, misunderstood, rejected, probably guilty, flirting with intimations of his/her own mortality and, mostly, expendable: the word and life go on even while he is incarcerated in his hospital room or in his apartment while "sitting *shiva*." His business and social and professional and even family life manage without him--like a stream of water which parts to accommodate a stone thrown into it and then both sides rejoin each other and roll along merrily without, as it were, another thought about the distraction. Are we that unimportant, that irrelevant? Does the "outside world" really care about us at all? One does not have to be paranoid to be troubled by such feelings of isolation.

It is this feeling of superfluosity or expendability to which the greeting to the patient and the mourner is addressed. We express the hope that he will be *reintegrated* into the routines of life where his place is assured, his virtues appreciated, his contributions important and valued. He is part of a community of sufferers and, therefore, should feel alone. This is the way we carry out the third of Ramban's trilogy of elements, that of enabling the patient "to obtain a restful spirit (*nachat ruach*) with his comrades."

I would imagine that the best visit and most effective antidote to this feeling of misery--loneliness, helplessness, maybe hopelessness--is that offered by *another* patient. Just as the Halakha demands of the poor man who is a recipient of charity that he himself perform *his* mitzvah of *tzedakah* by giving to another poor person, and just as a mourner is permitted to leave his quarters in order to pay a *shiva* visit to another mourner, so ought a patient, if his physical condition permits it, visit other sick people. Who better than a patient can empathize, understand, and look into the soul of another sufferer? Besides, such a visit may do even more good to the visitor-patient than to the patient being visited...

We should emphasize that in acknowledging the "down" feeling of the patient, *bikkur cholim* is directed more at the psychic than the physical condition of the patient--and the two are sometimes quite separate from each other. Thus, allaying the fears or calming the spirits of a depressed person (even if not technically sick) is too a fulfillment of the mitzvah of *bikkur cholim*. Indeed, every person suffers from a degree of existential anxiety; it is a universal condition, but one that is severely exacerbated by physical or mental illness.

I recall, in this respect, the powerful poem by D.H. Lawrence--

I am not a mechanism, an assembly of various sections.
And it is not because the mechanism is working wrongly
that I am ill.
I am ill because of wounds to the soul, to the deep
emotional self--

And the wounds to the soul take a long, long time,
only time can help
And patience [and a certain difficult repentance,
Long difficult repentance, realization of life's mistake
and the freeing oneself
From the endless repetition of the mistake]
Which mankind at large has chosen to sanctify

The poet is not afraid to speak of the presence of guilt--else, why the bold emphasis on repentance?--and to cry out his existential pain at the loss of personhood. This is symptomatic of a universal condition, which is why his words strike such a responsive chord.

V

This leads me to an important etymological point which is quite relevant to our theme and sheds much light on the fundamental nature of *bikkur cholim*. Where does the word *bikkur* come from? It is a word of many meanings--but I have not been able to find any intimation in Biblical Hebrew of the idea of "visit." (This sense of the word may be a modernism; I have not found the word to mean "visit" in Rabbinic literature as well.)

What then? I suggest that *bikkur* is related to the word *boker*, which means "morning" or "dawn": When we visit the sick, we must open a window for his depressed spirit, bring in light to his darkened soul, let the dawn and what it symbolizes enter the life of the patient. We must "enable the patient to obtain a restful spirit (*nachat ruach*) with his comrades." That is what, I believe, *bikkur cholim* really means. And it is a challenge worthy of our best and noblest efforts.

Let me point to a well known verse in the Psalms where this interpretation of the word *bikkur* reveals a new level of meaning. King David exclaims, "One thing I have asked of the Lord, that I will seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the pleasantness of the Lord and *le'vaker* in His temple" (Psalms 27:4). If that Hebrew word, from the same root as *bikkur*, is to be translated as "to visit," it is all very confusing: one who wishes to spend his life--"all the days of my life"--in the Temple, should not be praying for an occasional visit... However, if the word is taken as we have interpreted *bikkur cholim*, it makes eminently good sense: the Psalmist strives to spend his whole life in the Lord's temple, but what will he do there? If it is only "to behold the pleasantness of the Lord," noble as such a wish may be, it is a bit selfish and self-centered, a sort of spiritual hedonism. But what he really prays for is the ability *le'vaker*, to bring light and dawn and joy into the temple so that others who worship with him will find their lives transformed and filled with a new light and reason to live.

VI

We read in the book of Genesis (chapter 18) that after Abraham's circumcision at an advanced age, he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day, and the Lord appeared to him. The greatest of all Bible commentators, Rashi, citing the Talmud, tells us that this divine revelation was for the purpose of God performing the mitzvah of *bikkur cholim* by visiting Abraham in his state of recuperation. (In Judaism, God not only *commands* us to act ethically, but He does so Himself and becomes, as it were, a role model for humans.) A verse later we read that three people appeared before Abraham whereupon, despite his indisposition, he ran to make his guests comfortable. Here again we refer to Rashi who again quotes the Talmud: the three "people" were really three angels (or: messengers of God) in human form, and each had a specific mission to perform. One was to inform Sarah that she would, at the age of ninety, become a mother; the second came to heal Abraham; the third to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. No angel is appointed for two missions; each has one mission and no more.

Now, the question arises: if God entrusted His angels with the three tasks mentioned, especially that of healing of Abraham, why did He not entrust the same angel--or perhaps a special one, in addition to these three--to visit Abraham as an act of *bikkur cholim*? If God is appointing angelic agents for a variety of tasks, why not visiting the sick as well? Why did He have to do that by Himself?

I believe the answer is this: to bear good news, to heal the sick, to apprise Sarah of her imminent motherhood, to punish the wicked, to heal the righteous sick--all of these tasks may be safely relegated to others. Angels prove quite responsible in carrying out such missions. The same would hold true for the first two of Ramban's three elements of *bikkur cholim*--nursing the patient and praying for him. But the third part, that of bringing *boker* or dawn into his life, of letting the sufferer see the light of day and banish the darkness out of his heart, that *God Himself must do*, if only as a lesson for all mankind. God reserved that for Himself; *bikkur cholim* is too important to leave to others, even to angels. Only He has the capacity--unassignable to another--to demonstrate how to bring joy and light and hope and consolation into the heart of the sufferer. Only after He has shown the way, can humans be entrusted to imitate Him and do likewise.

Only God who knows all--"for the Lord peers into the heart" (I Samuel 16:7)--and humans who have learned from Him the art of understanding and insight and empathy to relate to human suffering, whether physical or emotional or spiritual or existential, with the mission of opening a window in the soul of the sufferer and bringing in morning, the blessing of a new and bright day--only they truly perform the mitzvah of *bikkur cholim*. And only they know the fullness of joy that can come from such a noble deed.

So, continue your work, For it is more than angelic. It is divine. And that makes it profoundly human.