

# BIKUR CHOLIM

"Heal us and we will be healed" (Jeremiah 17:14)  
"I, God, am your Healer" (Exodus 15:26)

Visiting the sick (bikur cholim) is one of the greatest of all the mitzvot. It is one of the mitzvot the fruits of which a person enjoys in this world, while the principal remains intact for him in the World to Come. (*Shabbat 127a*)

Once one of Rabbi Akiva's students became ill. None of the other students visited him, but Rabbi Akiva personally went to see him and swept and cleaned his room. This literally revived the student, who said, "Rabbi, you've brought me back to life!" As soon as Rabbi Akiva left, he taught "If a person does not visit the sick, it is as if he shed blood." (*Nedarim 40a*)

A visitor takes away one sixtieth of the illness. (*Nedarim 39b*)

Someone who visits the sick gives him life because he prays that he should live. But a person who does not visit him does not know what he needs, and therefore does not pray for him. (*Nedarim 40a*)

Everyone who visits the sick is saved from the judgment of Gehenna, as it is written (*Psalms 41:2-3*): "God will save him on the evil day." And what is his reward in this world? "God will protect him" --- from the evil inclination --- "and preserve him in life" --- from suffering --- "and he will be praised in the land" --- all will feel privileged to be associated with him. (*Nedarim 40a*)

## Laws on Visiting the Sick

*From Yoreh Deah #335 as interpreted by R. Avraham Greenbaum*

- Except in the event of a sudden, serious illness; no one but relatives and close friends should visit the sick immediately. Other people should not visit until after the first three days so as not to give the sick person the “name” of an invalid, which may have an adverse affect on his mazal. Even an important person should visit someone of lesser importance. One should not visit an enemy so that he should not think one is glad about his suffering. One may visit the same person even several times in one day, and the more one visits, the more commendable it is --- *as long as it is not a burden on the patient*. Where it is impossible to visit in person, one may fulfill the mitzvah by speaking on the telephone (*Rabbi Moshe Feinstein*).
- “One who enters a house to visit the sick may sit neither upon the bed nor upon a seat, but wrap himself about and sit in front of him, for the Shechinah (Divine Presence) is above an invalid’s pillow” (*Shabbat 12b*)

- The three main components of the mitzvah of visiting the sick are:
  - To check if there is anything the patient needs and to attend to it.
  - To life the patient's spirits. Avoid anything that might give rise to depression and negativity. Be as sensitive as possible to his feelings. Some conditions are highly embarrassing to the patient. In such cases, rather than going to the patient's room to see him in person, it is better for the visitor to stay outside and ask other members of the household if there is anything he can do for him.
  - To pray for the patient. Someone who visits a sick person but does not pray for him or her has not fulfilled the mitzvah.
    - For this reason, the Sages advise against visiting the sick in the first three hours of the day because most patients experience a certain improvement in their condition at that time and one may not realize the importance of praying for them. Similarly the Sages advise not to visit in the last three hours of the day because there is often a deterioration at this time and one may despair of praying. When praying for the sick, one should include him or her among all sick Jews, because their collective merit makes the

prayer more acceptable. The traditional prayer for the sick is:

**“May it be Your will, HaShem my God and God of my forefathers, that You should quickly send complete healing from heaven---healing of the soul and healing of the body--- to (patient's name), son/daughter of (mother's name), among the other sick members of the Jewish People”**

*(Y'hi ratzon milfanecha adonai elohai v'elohai avotai sh'tishlach mehareh r'fuah shlemah min hashmayim r'fuat ha'nefesh v'r'fuat ha'guf l' \_\_\_\_\_ ben/bat \_\_\_\_\_ b'toch shaar choli yisrael)*

- Healing is all in the hands of God, as it is written, “I kill and I make alive, I would and I heal, and there is no one that can deliver out of my hand.” *(Deuteronomy 32:39)*
  - This means that the duty of the person visiting the sick is to help them consciously re-connect to their awareness of their relationship with God. It is also their duty to intercede and offer prayers to God for complete and full healing (see above).
  - “When a human being prescribes a medicine it may be good for one person but harmful to another. Not so the Holy One, blessed by He. The Torah He gave to the Jewish People is an elixir of life for the whole body, as it is said *(Proverbs 4:22)* “and health to all his flesh”. *(from Eruvin 54a)*

- King Hezekiah hid the Book of Remedies; a book that contained all the medical information, wisdom, and healing techniques of the times. It was said that the cure for every physical ailment was in this book, and yet this great king hid it.
  - Hezekiah felt that the Book of Remedies was too effective. “When a person became sick, he would follow what was written in the book and be healed, and as a result people’s hearts were not humbled before Heaven because of illness.” *(Rashi on Pesachim 56a)* The Book of Remedies turned sickness and healing into a process that was only “mechanical” ...that forgot to include God in the equation. For this reason, Hezekiah in his wisdom hid the book. He wanted people to understand that illness, terrible as it may be, is also an opportunity for an individual to deepen and increase awareness of their relationship with God.
  - This hiding of the Book of Remedies is one of the three things that King Hezekiah is praised for by the Sages of the Talmud. *(Pesachim 56a)*
  - Despite this approval of the hiding of the Book of Remedies, the Talmud is filled with medicinal and herbal remedies. Why? This is addressed by the Maharsha *(Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Aideles 1555-1632)* in his commentary on the Talmudic tractate Gittin 60a; who explains that the remedies for illnesses are written in Talmud to avoid

them being entirely forgotten, and to additionally make it clear to future generations that there is “no branch of wisdom lacking from the Talmud” ... so that “no scoffer will be able to say that the Sages of the Talmud lacked healing wisdom”.

- The RaMBaM (also known as Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon or Maimonides, 1135-1204) was not only the major codifier of Jewish law and one of the most important and influential of Jewish philosophers... he is also universally recognized as one of the greatest healers that has ever lived. Well versed in the healing systems of the Greek and Arab worlds, as well as Jewish, he became the doctor for the vizier of Egypt. His classic “Hanhagat HaBri’ut” (Guide to Good Health) was written in 1198 in response to a direct request by the Egyptian sultan for medical advice. This text is still utilized by physicians today around the world. His advice in this and his other writings teaches the healer how to integrate physical and spiritual healing into complete well-being.
  - “The physician should make every effort to see that everyone, sick and healthy alike, should always be cheerful, and he should seek to relieve them of the spiritual and psychological forces that cause anxiety. This is the first principle in curing any patient” (*Hanhagat HaBri’ut* 3:13-14)

- “If a person cared for himself the way he cares for his horse he would avoid many serious illnesses. You won’t find anyone who gives his horse too much fodder. But he himself eats to excess. He makes sure his animal gets proper exercise...But when it comes to himself he neglects exercise...” (*Hanhagat HaBri’ut 1:3*)
- If the patient can be treated through diet alone he should not be treated with medicines. If it is impossible to control the illness without medications, the first choice should be medicines that are nourishing and foods that have medicinal properties. When using medicines one should begin with mild ones.... Medicines consisting of many ingredients should only be used when absolutely necessary. (*Hanhagat HaBri’ut 2:21-22*)
- One should never forget to strengthen the patient’s physical vitality with nourishing food and to strengthen his spiritual powers with fragrant odors, with music, by telling him happy stories that expand the heart, and by distracting his mind with things that make him and his friends laugh. The people chosen to take care of him should be those who know how to cheer him up. (*Hanhagat HaBri’ut 2:20*)
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- Rebbe Nachman of Breslov elucidated much of the teachings on healing from Torah, Talmud, and Zohar. The foundation of this pathway is *hitbodedut* (also called *hisbodedus*)... meditation.
  - This is the best way of coming close to God because it includes everything else... It is something that everyone can practice, from the smallest to the greatest. Everyone can talk to god and thereby reach the highest levels.  
(*Likutey Mohoran II, 25*)
  - Rebbe Nachman expounded upon the Talmudic passage from Shabbat 119b to teach that the “cure for a person’s wound can be received through the Sages, who have been entrusted with the power to interpret Torah. They know how to combine the letters of the Torah---and as explained above, the power of any medicine depends upon how the ingredients are combined” (*Likutey Mohoran I, 57*)
  - He taught, through his interactions with Dr. Guardia, a major physician of the time, that “it is not the doctor who heals, but the angel that goes with him”. We are to **appeal** in our prayers for the angels who guide the physicians to help attend the patient and bring about healing.
  - Rebbe Nachman taught that meditation and recitation of ten specific Psalms helps with the healing process. These Psalms are: 16, 32, 41, 42, 59, 77, 105, 137, and 150

Jewish healing practices are involved and detailed; based upon passages from TaNaKh as well as Talmud, Zohar, Bahir, and Sefer Yetzirah. Our Sages identified Ten Pulses (similar to the practice of Chinese “pulse doctors” and acupuncturists); each of which corresponds to a Hebrew vowel, a Psalm, and a specific melody. The Jewish healing systems are as complex as any in Chinese or Western medicine; and are based on each healing coming from God through an understanding of His teachings, text, and words.

### ***Health Related Quotes through Rabbi Avraham Greenbaum and [www.Azamra.org](http://www.Azamra.org)***

"Bodily health and wellbeing are part of the path to God. One must therefore avoid anything that may harm the body and one must cultivate healthful habits" -- Maimonides (*Rambam*) *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Deot* 4:1).

Sincere pursuit of the Torah and *mitzvot* is itself a guarantee of good health, "for they are our life and length of days". "If you will listen carefully to the voice of God and do what is right in His eyes and give ear to His precepts and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon you that I have put on the Egyptians. For I, God, am your Healer" (Exodus 15:26). "Serve God, and He will bless your bread and your water and remove sickness from within you" (Exodus 23:25).

In the words of the *Shulchan Aruch*: "It is a positive duty to take all due precautions and avoid anything that may be a danger to life, as it is written, 'Take care of yourself, and guard your soul diligently.' The sages prohibited many things that involve a risk to life. Anyone who violates such prohibitions, saying 'I'm only putting myself at risk - what business is that of anybody else?' or 'I'm not particular about such things' deserves a lashing." (*Choshen Mishpat* 427:8-10).

The table at which we eat is compared to the Temple altar (*Berachot* 55a). On the altar, representatives of the mineral, vegetable and animal worlds were transmuted into a "sweet savor to God" (Leviticus 1:9). Our task in eating is to elevate the physical food through devoting the energy it gives us to Torah, *mitzvot* and the service of God. The many different commandments involved in the preparation and eating of food contribute to this elevation. The blessings we recite before and after

eating and drinking transform these physical functions into acts of spiritual service, giving blessing to the food and drink as it enters our bodies.

"As long as you exercise, take care not to eat to the point of satiation and keep your bowels soft, you will not fall ill and your strength will increase. The opposite is true of someone who leads a sedentary life and takes no exercise. Even if such a person eats good food and takes care of himself according to proper medical principles, all his days will be full of pain and his strength will wane." -- Rambam, *Hilchot Deot* 4:15

The kind of "exercise" that promotes health is defined by Rambam: "Not every bodily movement is 'exercise'. Exercise is defined as any form of movement - whether vigorous, gentle or a combination of both - that involves some effort and causes an increase in one's breathing rate" (*Hanhagat HaBriut* 1:3). This corresponds to what today is called "aerobic" exercise, a steady, non-stop activity that involves a certain degree of effort and leads to increased rates of blood circulation and breathing without putting strain on the heart and lungs.

Each individual is different, and there are no general rules about how often a person should relieve himself. But the halachah is clear that one should relieve oneself as soon as possible if one feels the need (*Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 3:17; *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 4:1).

"If a person sleeps in order to allow his mind to rest and to give rest to his body so that he should not become sick and unable to serve G-d because of illness, in this case his very sleep is service of G-d. This is the meaning of the precept of the sages that "all your deeds should be for the sake of heaven" -- Rambam, *Hilchot Deot* 3:3

"A joyous heart is good medicine but a broken spirit dries the bones" -- Proverbs 17:22