

Does God Make House Calls?

Parshat Vayera 5770

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

You know, as I look back over my career, it's hard to imagine that I've been a rabbi for over thirty years, especially since I'm only twenty nine! There are many things of which I'm proud that I've accomplished in my congregational work. Two, however, stand out for me. I believe that when I get to heaven some day, (I should live to be a hundred and twenty), these are the two things that will be invoked on my behalf! The first is that I helped organize the first daily minyan in Congregation *Heska Amuna* in Knoxville, Tennessee. And the second is the creation of the *Mitzvah Corp* in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

The *Mitzvah Corp* is a group of concerned congregants whose job it is to visit hospitalized and homebound members of the community. In addition to visiting the sick, members of the *Mitzvah Corp* also visited residents at the Jewish Home in Harrisburg and worked with the terminally ill in conjunction with our local hospice. As a matter of fact Donna Nurick, the grandmother of the beautiful baby we named to day is a certified nurse and was instrumental in helping create that program. Members of the *Mitzvah Corp* were not just 'friendly visitors;' they were a highly trained group of lay people, who knew about pastoral care and spiritual comfort. Our caring visitors approached people in crisis with a bag of tools that allowed them to bring strength and solace in times of crisis.

So, of all the things that I've done in the past thirty years, why am I especially proud of these two projects? First, I feel they are a continuing legacy which I left in the communities I served. Second, I'm especially proud of these two projects because, more than anything else that I've done, they created a powerful sense of community in the congregations I served. The *Mitzvah Corp* and the daily *minyan* brought people together in a unique way and made them aware of what it means to be a part of a caring community. These programs not only had an impact on the people they served but they influenced the people who helped to make them a reality. Finally, it seems to me that minyan and caring go the heart of what it means to be a Jew: to serve God and live a life of caring and loving kindness.

While a minyan is a quintessentially Jewish activity, one might argue that there's nothing inherently Jewish about visiting the sick. After all, many people visit their friends when they're not feeling well and certainly most people of faith have a tradition of visiting and caring for the sick.

You might be surprised to learn, then, that while doctors don't make house calls these days, God does, and that is the basis of *Bikkur Holim*, the *mitzvah* of visiting the sick. That is a lesson we learn in today's Torah portion. Any discussion of *Bikkur Holim* begins with Genesis 18. While the Torah doesn't specifically mention this *mitzvah*, it does teach us by example.

The opening words of our Torah portion are *va-yerah Adonai elav*, "God appear to Abraham." What could be more dramatic than that? Elsewhere in the Torah God speaks to Abraham, calls on him, but never appears to our forefather. Why, then, does God chose to appear to Abraham at this particular moments?

Our tradition teaches us, that this story is the basis of an important but often forgotten *mitzvah*: *Bikkur Holim*, visiting the sick. The sages point out that at the end of last week's parshah God instructed our forefather to circumcise himself at the tender age of 99. Surgery is not easy at any age but it's particularly difficult for a senior citizen. As *Parshat Vayera* opens, Abraham is recuperating from surgery. God appears to him at that moment in order to make a sick call. The sages teach us that *Bikkur Holim* is not just a social visit or a nice thing to do, but a responsibility and one of the ways that we imitate the ways of God. 'As God visited the sick,' the sages said, so too, 'should we visit the sick and home bound.'

But something is missing in this lovely Midrash. Isn't it strange that despite the fact that God visited our forefather, the Torah says nothing about God curing him or even lessening his pain. If the sages are right, that God visits the sick, then one would have expected nothing less than a miracle during this visit. After all, we do call God *rofei kol basar*, 'the healer of all flesh!'

So what's the point of God's alleged house call, if not to heal Abraham? Jewish tradition teaches us that the purpose of *Bikkur Holim* is to provide the patient with the 'healing' that precedes the 'cure.' Medicine and therapy can help; we must allow doctors and nurses to do their job. But a visitor brings something equally important to their sick. The visitor brings the healing power of love. He has the ability to bring caring and empathy into the sick room, and to restore a sense of dignity and humanity to someone who feels disconnected from his or her own body. Just when the patient is feeling like a statistic or a diagnosis, who is prodded and poked by medical professionals, the caring visitor reminds the patient that she is a human being, created in the image of God.

God didn't appear to Abraham as a doctor or a miracle worker. God didn't even appear as God! The Torah says: "Adonai appeared to Abraham...and behold, there were three men..." God came as a friend and as a passing visitor. Sometimes the most important thing we offer another person is our presence, nothing more and nothing less.

In discussing the power of *Bikkur Holim*, the Talmud says that one who visits the infirm takes away one sixtieth of the person's illness. Taking away a percentage means you can alleviate their discomfort but you can't cure them. The rabbis were pragmatists. They saw the power of being a visitor but they understood its limitations.

Anyone who has ever been ill can testify to the healing power of a welcomed visitor. Of course, sometimes we want to be left alone when we're not feeling well and there are times when too many visitors can tax the patient. Visitors who over stay their welcome can become a burden so it's important to be sensitive to the needs of the patient. But for the most part visitors make a difference simply by their presence. Showing up is half the battle.

What do we do when we get there? Not much! It's not our job to diagnose the illness or share our medical history with patient. The main job of the visitor is to be a caring presence. It is our job to listen and not to talk, to find out what the patient needs and to be a facilitator. And most important it is the job of the visitor to offer a prayer – a simple prayer.

Now some of you here might say that you're not so comfortable praying for others. You might say, "Isn't that what a rabbi is supposed to do." And my answer would be: "Not so – anyone can pray, and a prayer offered by a caring friend or relative can be even more powerful than that of a rabbi who is expected to pray! When Miriam, the sister of Moses, was afflicted with leprosy, we're told that he

prayed for his sister with the following words: *El na refa na la*, “Please God, please heal her.” Moses’ prayer consisted of five words, none of which had more than three letters. There is not a person here who could not say, “May God give you with a speedy recovery” or “May God lessen your pain and give you strength.”

Most important of all, our main task as a visitor is learning how to listen, not only with our ears but with our hearts. There’s no greater gift than the gift of our presence; making the patient feel that we’re completely there for them. This is a skill that can be learned; it takes practice but it is something we can all do.

The sages tell us, “One who visits the sick causes them to live.” The isolation and depression that often accompany an illness, even a minor illness, can feel like a spiritual death. We ought to remember that visiting the sick is more than a social call; it’s a *mitzvah* call. The patient should not feel she has to impress her visitor and the visitor should come with the realization that she’s there to serve the needs of the patient and not to entertain or to be entertained.

When Rabbi Yohanan fell ill, Rabbi Hanina came to visit him. “Is your suffering welcome to you?” he asked. “Neither the suffering nor the reward,” said Rabbi Yohanan. This seems like a strange conversation. What did Rabbi Hanina mean by his question? I believe that Hanina was acknowledging the reality of his colleague’s pain and allowing him to express his anguish... sometimes that’s what visiting the sick is all about. We give the patient the opportunity to kvetch!

But the story goes on. Rabbi Hanina immediately put his hand on Rabbi Yohanan and healed him. Human touch is powerful – it can bring relief to the suffering. Despite the fact that we read elsewhere that Rabbi Yohanan had a reputation as a miracle worker, he apparently couldn’t heal himself. The Talmud points out: “A prisoner cannot free himself from jail.” No matter how capable a person may be there are certain things he can’t accomplish on his own. We need one another. We cannot bring the balm of healing to our own souls. We need the compassion and understanding of others.

If I can leave you with one message this morning, it’s that Bikkur Holim is not just a rabbi’s professional responsibility. It is a *mitzvah* incumbent on all of us. Of course we all want our rabbi to visit when we’re not feeling well. But every person has gifts to offer that are unique. And as the song says, “People who need people are the luckiest people in the world.” Vulnerability is not a weakness or an embarrassment. Only when we acknowledge our vulnerability are we able to let people into our lives; only then can we realize what a gift it is to receive another person’s love. Bikkur Holim is all about vulnerability – the visitor’s ability to acknowledge it and the patient’s willingness to express it. Bikkur Holim is all about giving and receiving from others.

Shabbat Shalom