

## Visiting the Sick

Bikur Cholim, or visiting the sick, is more than an act of charity; it is a commandment that is considered binding on all Jews. Dating from the time of the Middle Ages, one of the principal institutions established by Jewish communities was the local Bikur Cholim Society. These groups continue to exist today, all over the world, with Jews caring for each other by bringing the strength of the community to an ill person's bedside.

People who are ill, have disabilities or who are elderly and homebound often find themselves isolated. This is where the Bikur Cholim visit is so helpful. But since visiting an individual in the hospital or home is not easy and you might feel awkward, uncertain of yourself, anxious or even fearful, the following are some tips to help:

Before the visit: Whether the person is at home or in the hospital, always call to make sure that the he or she is receptive to visitors. If the individual consents, let them know when you will be arriving.

### The visit

It's best to keep the visit short.

When visiting someone in the hospital:

- Always knock on the door before entering.
- Say hello to other patients in the room.
- Excuse yourself and wait in the hall if the doctor arrives while you are visiting.
- Sit on a chair, not on the bed.

Be a good listener.

Be non-judgmental.

Maintain good eye contact.

Lean forward, be attentive, and try not to fidget.

### Helpful Hints While Visiting

Sometimes it helps to have some guidelines in starting a conversation. This can be made easier by using open-ended questions. In trying to carry on a conversation, you might want to avoid such words as "who," "where," "why." They tend to elicit one-word answers, thus impeding the flow of conversation. Here are some examples of open-ended questions:

- How are you feeling?
- How is your family?
- What was it like working at (Bloomingdale's)?
- Tell me about your grandchildren.
- That's a lovely (picture). How did you get it?

Try to avoid offering platitudes or giving advice, such as:

"It's God's will" or "I know how you feel." Platitudes rarely help patients feel better because they may not address the patients' concerns, their feelings or their belief systems.

### Patience is a Virtue

When visiting the sick, allow time for pauses in the conversation. This is not an easy thing to do. We tend to want to give immediate comfort and thus alleviate our own discomfort. Sometimes silence is a way of being with a patient without forcing a conversation that the patient may be unable to participate in.

### Empathy

We can show empathy by such statements as: "So you felt embarrassed when you could not pick up the phone." "It must have been sad not going to your nephew's wedding." Empathy, or trying to put yourself in the ill or grieving person's shoes, is a sign that you care and are trying to understand.

### Visiting the Dying

For most of us, making a visit to a terminally ill person can be very uncomfortable. Try to make a connection with the patient by keeping the conversation in the here and now. Such questions as: "Tell me what you had for breakfast." "What are some of your favorite books?" "How are your children doing?" are appropriate.

If the patient cries, allow yourself to cry, too. You can cry even if the patient is not crying. It shows a caring connection to the dying individual who often feels alone and abandoned.

### Concluding Thoughts

- Try to be present. You don't have to make things better because often you really can't.
- People who are dying may want to get things off their chest. Sometimes all you need to do is to be a sounding board.
- You do not have to spend a lot of time with an ill or dying patient. Your being there is in itself is a *mitzvah*.

Information for this handout was taken from Rabbi Isaac N Trainin Bikur Cholim Coordinating Council, a program of JBFC.