

Bikkur Cholim: The Mitzvah of Visiting the Sick

By Rabbi Michael Lotker

For many of the commandments, there is a specific guideline as to how much you are expected to do. For example, with regard to charity/*zedakah*, the minimum expected is 10% and for the mitzvah of eating *matzah* on *Pesach*, the minimum is the volume of an egg. For several of the mitzvot however, the Talmud teaches us that there is no limit. Furthermore the benefit of doing such mitzvot applies to our credit both here and in the world to come. *Bikkur Cholim*, visiting the sick, is one of these most special *mitzvot*.

As you will often hear me say, Judaism is a religion that focuses much more on what we do than what we believe. This has a very practical consequence; we must fulfill *mitzvot* even when we do not feel like doing them. Whether we are in a charitable mood or not, the hungry still need to be fed and the homeless sheltered. As it is sometime put, this is the reason we call them “commandments” and not “suggestions.” Even more importantly, our Reform Movement stresses these ethical commandments most of all. Reform tradition teaches that you can decide whether to eat kosher or not, pray daily or not, wear a yarmulke/kippah or not but you are not free to ignore the ethical *mitzvot* and be considered a good Reform Jew.

Fortunately, we have a special committee at Temple Ner Ami devoted to the mitzvah of *Bikkur Cholim*. This is the Natalie Krantz Caring Committee, currently chaired by Shlomo Kreitzer. With just a few members, we manage to visit Pleasant Valley Hospital at least once per week to touch base with each person registered as Jewish there [by the way, you can help our Committee by making sure that you let the hospital know that you or your loved one is registered as “Jewish” when you are admitted]. But we would love to do more if we could get your help. We could use people who would be able to visit St. John’s Hospital in Oxnard, people who would be willing to visit some of the local nursing homes and long term care facilities, people who would be will to call and or visit others who may not be feeling well at their own homes and someone who would be willing to help us coordinate all of the above.

You should know that members of this Committee tell me that they receive far more than the give, that they feel good helping others in a difficult, needful or lonely place and that they are reminded that their health is not to be taken for granted but is a wonderful gift. I know that there are some of you who might be inclined to help but are nervous about what to do or say on a visit. Please know that it is your presence that matters most, not some clever or profound statement that you might make. You will be helped to prepare by the rabbi and by others with experience in this mitzvah and we have created calling cards and even have small prayer books for this purpose. Please do get involved.

One more thing – if you or someone you know is not doing so well, please, please let us know so we can help. I can’t tell you how many times people feel that they or their loved one has been ignored by Temple Ner Ami because no one ever called or visited. But to do so, we have to know about it. The hospitals and care centers are helpful but people do

slip between the cracks. You will be helping us greatly by letting Katie or the rabbi at the office know about your situation.