

Always Call, Always Ask
By Rabbi Michael Lotker

There are very few rules of Jewish social behavior that always apply, that have no exceptions. But here's one that I believe is universal. "Always call and always ask."

Here's the situation. Someone you know has had some misfortune or tragedy in their lives. Perhaps they are ill; perhaps someone close to them is ill. Perhaps there has been a death in the family and you've heard about the funeral and are thinking of calling or paying a *shivah* (condolence) call or visit. But you have second thoughts. You wonder if the person might not be comfortable speaking about the problem (of course what you are really thinking is that YOU might not feel comfortable speaking about the problem if it had happened to you). You wonder if the person is so busy with details, hospitals, running around, etc. that they might view your call or visit as an intrusion. Perhaps you recognize that you feel uncomfortable making the call. You might wonder "what can I say, how can I help?"

So here's the simple rule. Always call and always ask. Once you've placed the call, you have only to speak a simple truth. It might be "I'm sorry to hear about your loss," or "I'm sorry that your mom is ill." You might add "I just want you to know that I care about you and am thinking about you and I am here for you." That's it. Just that simple. You don't have to go on (in fact you shouldn't go on) about how this once happened to you and you got over it – or about how it could be much worse, etc.. Just be there.

Then, be guided by what your friend has to say. They might indeed say that they are really not up to talking at the moment. Or they might be aching for someone with whom they can pour out their hearts. They will let you know.

But, and this is the critical part, they cannot fail to be touched by your concern and caring. They will know that they are not alone and, on the contrary, that they have friends and family that care about them. This may not solve their crisis, but it will surely make it easier to bear.

I believe that God works through people. God comforts the ill and bereaved when we reach out and perform these divine mitzvot. I bet that sometime in the next few days and weeks, you will find yourself wondering if you should make that call. Do it! Do it for your friend; do it for yourself; do it for your rabbi and do it for God.