

Torah Insights

Bikur Cholim – Visiting The Sick In Jewish Tradition: *Imitato Dei Or Imitato Humanus*

In Genesis, chapter 18, we read that God appeared to Abraham as he was sitting in the doorway of his tent. There is no record of what God said to Abraham. Therefore, the rabbis interpreted this passage in a unique way. At the end of chapter 18, we read that Abraham complied with God's command to circumcise himself and his family members. Now it is the third day after the *brit* and Abraham is recuperating from the surgery. God appears to offer best wishes for a healing and a speedy recovery. The need to explain verse 1 in this unique way stems from the absence of a conversation and the abrupt interruption of the meeting with God. Abraham runs off to greet three strange travelers and invites them into his home. (Indeed, the rabbis derive a principle from Abraham's action: it is more important to welcome people into one's house than to host the Holy Spirit.)

There are difficulties with this interpretation. How do we know that Abraham was recuperating from the circumcision? It is not written that Abraham was sick. God does not speak with Abraham; He appears to Abraham in a vision but the content of the vision, the conversation is not recorded. In these circumstances, *Midrash* – the Oral tradition, fills in the missing gaps. But, we cannot be sure that this is the correct interpretation.

In Genesis, chapter 48, verse 1, we read that Joseph comes to visit his father Jacob upon hearing that Jacob is ill. He brings his two sons, Menashe and Ephraim with him to visit their ailing grandfather. In this context, we have specific reference to human beings alleviating the pain and suffering of another human being by visiting their sick-bed. Indeed, Joseph seems to be a very good chaplain: he listens carefully to the concerns of the patient and travels with him on the patient's journey. Joseph makes the burial plans with his father and swears to fulfill Jacob's last wishes. In Jewish tradition, there is a dictum: the deeds of our forebears are to be imitated by their descendants.

Therefore, when people visit a sick person, we may be fulfilling God's desire that we follow in God's footsteps or possibly, we are imitating the good practices set by our human role models.