

Hashem appeared to him...while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent. (18:1)

Rashi's commentary to this *pasuk* is well known. Hashem appeared to Avraham *Avinu*, visiting him during the Patriarch's recuperation from his *Bris Milah*. It was the third day following the circumcision, a day which is especially painful, so Hashem was *mevaker choleh*, visited the sick. *Rashi's* source is *Chazal*, who laud the exalted nature of this *mitzvah*. While everyone agrees that this *mitzvah* is meaningful, both to the beneficiary and benefactor, it is also a source of incredible reward to the individual who fulfills it.

The *Sefer HaMiddos* writes concerning the *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim*: "In the merit of *bikur cholim*, one will not leave this world amidst *yisurim*, pain and suffering." The reason for this is quite simple: The individual who alleviates another Jew's pain in some way will have his own pain alleviated. Hashem does not allow for any good deed to go unrequited. We are rewarded for the good we do for others, *b'middah k'neged middah*, on the scale of measure for measure. *Bikur cholim* is a prime example.

I think that a deeper meaning can be attributed to the *Sefer HaMiddos'* statement. We all accept that one who visits a sick person alleviates his pain in some way. As a result, he will not suffer when the time for his departure from this world arrives. It is "tit-for-tat", by doing for someone else one garners reward for himself. Perhaps there is much more to this. When one empathizes with the pain endured by the *choleh*, he also experiences pain. He feels sad, miserable, hurt that his friend is suffering. It takes a personal toll on him. Thus, since he has already suffered, he no longer is required to suffer for his own sake.

In other words, one does not simply visit the sick and then go about his day with business as usual. To visit, be *mevaker*, a sick person means to take something of the *choleh* back with him, to empathize with his predicament, to somehow feel his pain. Otherwise, it is a simple visit for which he will certainly be rewarded, but he is losing out on the depth and true meaning of the *mitzvah*.

I just came across a story I wrote a number of years ago which supports this idea. *Horav Sholom Dov Ber, zl, m'Lubavitch*, was deeply engrossed in study as his young son slept in his crib in an adjacent room. The infant began to cry, but his father was so involved in his learning that he did not hear the child's cries. The child's grandfather, the venerable founder of *Chabad chassidus*, the *Baal HaTanya, zl*, lived one floor above them. He was also studying Torah. Yet, he was able to hear his grandson's cries. He immediately went downstairs and discovered that the infant had fallen out of his crib. He picked up the child, took him into his arms and began to soothe him until the child fell asleep, after which he placed him back in the crib. He later went over to his son and said, "Torah study should not be an excuse for not hearing the cry of another fellow in need. Regardless of his age, you must reach out to him."

The above story is not a *bikur cholim* story. I write it because it is a story which defines how a Jew is to act. We all perform many acts of kindness. How do these acts of *chesed* affect us personally? Do they make us better, more caring people? As a result, have we developed greater sensitivity to the plight of those less fortunate than we are? How often do we really get involved in the acts of *chesed* to the point that they are on our minds all the time?

When we visit someone who is sick, it is often on automatic pilot. Everyone is busy; we all have places to go and things to do. Believe me, the fellow whom we are visiting wishes that he had things to do and places to go – and that he was able to go! It is all about listening, raising our awareness and empathizing with those in need. It makes such a difference, and quite possibly, it will be a *z'chus* that we will never have to undergo such travail personally.