

And there was a darkness of gloom throughout the land of Egypt...No man could see his brother nor could anyone rise from his place. (10:22,23)

In his *sefer*, *Yalkut Chinuch L'Doros*, Rabbi Simcha Zissel Dessler, *Shlita*, quotes a story from Horav Yisrael Meir Lau, *Shlita*, which is well-worth repeating. Fifty years ago, a place in the center of Tel Aviv's downtown was where the wagon drivers would line up and wait for passengers who either wanted to travel or to ship their packages. One of these drivers was an observant Jew, by the name of Yoska, who would first participate in the *vasikin*, sunrise, *minyan*, and then he was off to work. As time passed, Yoska's aged horse left this world. Lacking the funds to purchase a replacement horse, Yoska was left bereft of his horse and the livelihood it generated. His daily staple of attending services in the morning continued unabated. After all, he was a Jew, a poor one no less, but he had his daily obligations -- and *davening* with this *minyan* was one of them. When the congregation reached *Shemoneh Esrai*, everyone but Yoska rose from his seat. Normally, the members would ignore this, but today exactly ten men were present -- including Yoska. If he did not join in, they were unable to continue. They went over and motioned for him to get up. He ignored them. One by one, each one thought he could convince Yoska to get up -- to no avail. Finally, Yoska got up and declared, "I have been out of a source of *parnasah*, livelihood, for a few months. Yet, no one in the *shul* bothered to come over to me and ask, "Yoska, what can we do to help you? All of a sudden, you need to say *kedushah* and everyone realizes that I am alive?"

Rav Lau continued, "The Torah teaches us about the curse of the plague of *choshech*, darkness. The darkness that permeated Egypt was so intense that one person could not see another. An Egyptian was unable to be made aware of his brother's needs. Each Egyptian was in his own little cubicle of space. He could not reach out, and no one could reach in to him. Concerning the Jews, the Torah writes that their dwellings had light. From the *pesukim*, one is able to see the difference between the Jew and the gentile. We were able to look in and care about the needs of our fellow. The Egyptians were more concerned with themselves than with their fellow. Their lives represented darkness, such that one cannot rise up and see outside of his immediate perimeter.

Reaching out to care for our fellow is a core value of Judaism, rooted in the principle of *ahavas Yisrael*. We are to care for our brother, not just in times of joy, but especially when he is struggling. One of the *mitzvos* that stand out in this area of *chesed* is the *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim*, which extends beyond visiting the sick once they have been confined, but to look in and take an interest in our fellow's wellbeing. [I emphasize that this applies, not only concerning one's physical wellbeing, but his emotional stability as well.] The *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim* is not about physically visiting the sick, but rather, about being present for others in their time of need. It underscores the power of a small, often innocuous, gesture: cleaning a room, offering comfort and hope; or simply showing up and saying, "I am here for you!" These simple acts make a difference not only in a person's physical recovery, but also in his emotional and spiritual well-being.

Chaim was confined to a hospital bed for an extended period. He suffered from a debilitating illness which, after a long time, responded to treatment. As a result, the doctors did not view him to be a patient in grave danger. His illness would take months to cure, during which time his emotions would be tested to their limit. Despite having family and friends, no steady stream of visitors appeared. Every once in a while, someone would pop in, say hello, wish him well and disappear.

Everything changed when a stranger, a representative of the local *bikur cholim* organization, visited him. The visitor was a complete stranger, but a dedicated volunteer who understood that, if he was taking the time to perform an act of *chesed*, he was going to do it right. During the visit, he noticed that the patient's room felt cold and sterile. It was uninviting. He immediately opened the shades, allowing sunlight to shine in. He brought some fresh flowers which brightened the room. It was these small gestures that changed the atmosphere in the room. He continued coming, offering words of encouragement, slowly pulling the patient out of his self-imposed misery. The patient, once neglected and forgotten, now had other visitors. People heard that his attitude had taken a positive turn.

Slowly, the man's health returned. The doctors were amazed, attributing the improvement to his positive emotional and mental state. The patient himself said, "Until a few weeks ago, I had all but given up hope of living. I was going to die, not just from the illness, but from the loneliness. The visits gave me hope and the strength to fight." We all can engender a positive change in a shut-in's life. Indeed, one does not have to be deathly ill to be a shut-in. Some people, for a variety of reasons, drop out of society. They are self-imposed shut-ins. It is up to us to open their doors and coax them to come out. It may not be easy at first, but the reward – both personal and from Hashem -- will make it worthwhile.