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BY THE TEREBINTHS OF MAMRE:
THE RABBINIC LITERATURE OF
BIKKUR CHOLIM

Elena L. Stein

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for ordination
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Referee: Dr. Edward Goldman

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When I decided to write my rabbinic thesis on *bikkur cholim*, I had no intention of doing most of my research from a sickbed. Now that my thesis is complete and my health is restored, I thank God and the many individuals who helped me to attain my goals. I am especially grateful to my thesis referee, Dr. Edward Goldman, who oversaw research, writing, and editing with great patience and attention to detail.

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Digest

This thesis examines aggadic materials on *bikkur cholim*, visiting the sick. With the aid of computer searches, word indexes, and concordances, passages from rabbinic literature related to visiting the sick were excerpted. Some of the passages mention *bikkur cholim* directly. Others engage the subject by inference.

The passages come from TaNaKh, Commentaries to TaNaKh, Mishna, Tosephta, halachic midrashim, aggadic midrashim, and Talmud. They are translated into English, placed in chronological order, and examined individually and collectively. Information gleaned from modern manuals on visiting the sick acts as tools for understanding the texts from a clinical perspective.

Through systematic study of the views on *bikkur cholim* found in rabbinic literature, this thesis reconstructs rabbinic ideas and ideals concerning the purpose of *bikkur cholim*, the nature of the *choleh*, and the roles and responsibilities of the visitor. It traces the development of the concept of *bikkur cholim* as it changes from early rabbinic commentaries to later midrashic literature. It demonstrates how aggadic materials can assist the modern reader in constructing a personal approach to *bikkur cholim*.

Chapter One provides an overview of existing literature on *bikkur cholim*. It demonstrates that the existing literature is inadequate with respect to providing proper exegesis of aggadic materials. It includes English translations of the passages to be studied in subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two provides an exegesis of texts concerning the *mevaker(et) cholim*, the one who visits the sick. It addresses the unique aspects of rabbinic understanding of the *mevaker(et) cholim*. It traces the development of the

rabbinic concept of the *mevaker(et)* as it changed from early commentaries, where God is viewed as the primary visitor, through later midrashim where the activities of the human visitor become more delineated. The chapter emphasizes the distinctiveness of the rabbinic view on visiting the ill, in contrast to Ancient Near Eastern and biblical ideas about isolating the ill.

Chapter Three focuses on the rabbinic understanding of the *choleh*. It addresses the paradoxical nature of rabbinic views on the *choleh*. Chapter Three indicates that the rabbis viewed the *choleh* as close to God and far from God, physically ill and spiritually ill, similar to other *cholim* yet dissimilar due to individual personality.

Chapter Four shows that aggadot can contribute to modern ideas and ideals concerning care for the sick. It examines the potential for use of non-halachic materials as resources for current practice. It assesses the excerpted materials for their relevance to the modern *mevaker(et)* *cholim* and the modern *choleh*.

Appendices correspond to ideas presented in the four chapters. They include a time line for texts, the excerpted texts in their original language, an illustration of Zeno's paradox, and a translation of Joseph Caro's laws of visiting the sick.

It is my hope that this thesis will be useful to the student of midrash, the practitioner of *bikkur cholim*, and the *choleh*, alike. Its careful study of the aggadic materials is meant to provide insight into the rabbinic mind and inspiration for the modern Jew. Its multifaceted approach to the text can, perhaps, provide an example of the utility of the tools of story-telling and exegesis.

Chapter One

A Survey of the Literature on *Bikkur Cholim*

In every generation, individuals live on a continuum between health and illness. Interactions between those who find themselves on different ends of that continuum impact people in varied and sometimes dramatic ways.

Attending to the needs of the infirm is one of the many social obligations which Judaism has clothed in religious significance. By elevating the act of visiting the sick to the status of a commandment, Judaism ensures regular encounters between persons in a state of health and persons who are afflicted.

The term "*bikkur cholim*" refers to the mitzvah of visiting the sick. Jewish tradition contains numerous writings dedicated to the subject. I identify four types of written materials which pertain to matters of *bikkur cholim*, each one approaching the subject from a different perspective. The four classifications are as follows:

- 1) Legal
- 2) Liturgical
- 3) Psychological
- 4) Aggadic

The legal materials pertaining to *bikkur cholim* include Talmud and the literature of the poskim. This literature addresses questions of *halacha* and provides Jewish legal opinions or rulings concerning the practice of *bikkur cholim*. The bulk of Jewish literature on *bikkur cholim* examines the subject from a legal perspective.

The term *bikkur cholim* does not appear in TaNaKh, but Talmud mentions *bikkur cholim* directly.¹ Talmud also provides general laws for the treatment of others, which apply to proper conduct between visitors and patients.² Both Maimonides and Caro developed legal codes, distilling basic rules for the who? what? when? where? and how? of visiting the sick.³

¹ Nedarim 39b, Baba Kamma 50a, Baba Kamma 85a, Baba Metzia 30b.

² Yoreh Deah 33a, Taanit 21b, Yoma 85b, Baba Kamma 5a.

³ Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Bikkur Cholim. Joseph Caro, Shulchan Aruch 335.

Medieval and modern responsa literature addresses numerous queries concerning situations that arise between patients and the doctors, relatives, and friends who visit them. Contemporary articles found in "The Journal of Medicine and Halacha," and essays collected in Fred Rosner's Medicine and Jewish Law⁴ all present Jewish legal perspectives on issues between patient and visitor. Conferences of the National Association of Jewish Chaplains frequently include at least one discussion of halachic issues that arise for people who make it their life's work to visit the sick.⁵

The Jewish legal perspective has helped to define proper Jewish behavior in the context of *bikkur cholim*. Technological advances and changes in secular laws concerning medical care continue to raise challenges to our previous standards of proper behavior. The legal approach to visiting the sick, and the writings engendered by that approach constitute one of the more significant methods of studying the subject of *bikkur cholim*.⁶

Among the earliest prayers recorded in the Jewish tradition are those for the sick. In the biblical Book of Bamidbar, Moses prays for his leprous sister, Miriam, with the simple plea: "Please, God, Heal her. Please" (12:13). As Jewish culture has evolved, so, too have prayers for healing. A tradition of prescribed Psalms, blessings, and prayers recited during times of illness has found its way into the corpus of Jewish literature, constituting a second category of writings for *bikkur cholim*.

Traditional Jewish prayers for the sick include the eighth benediction of the Amidah: a *misheh berach* prayer which has been recited as part of the Torah service since the Middle Ages; and Psalms 90-108, 20, 38, 41, 86, 118, and 119. Recently, women's prayers called *tekhines* have been translated and

⁴ Rosner, Fred. Medicine and Jewish Law. New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1993.

⁵ Minutes of meetings of NAJC: 1992-1995. Some of the more notable reports concern the question of Jews administering Christian sacraments (May 1994), and responsibility of the chaplain to the Jewish family who solicits a halachic decision concerning removal of life support, but then acts in violation of that decision (November 1992).

⁶ For a more in depth analysis of the use of halacha in contemporary settings, see Dorff, Elliot. Contemporary Jewish Ethics and Morality, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

reexamined as resources for healing prayers.⁷ Modern collections of prayers for the sick include Gates of Healing⁸ and Healing of Soul, Healing of Body.⁹ Two rabbinic theses submitted for ordination from the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion analyze the liturgical materials available to both patient and visitor.¹⁰

A third approach to the subject of *bikkur cholim*, the psychological approach, has been utilized a great deal in publications of the past three decades. The psychological approach maintains that the act of visiting the sick can be psychologically beneficial to the persons involved, particularly when the visitor incorporates psychotherapeutic method into the visit. Manuals for training clergy and lay-volunteers rely heavily on psychological models of understanding and enhancing the encounters that take place between the sick and those who wish to help them.¹¹ Their use of the psychological approach is effective when it comes to helping the modern reader become a part of a caring community dedicated to serving others.

The publications which rely on the psychological approach frequently include references to Jewish biblical, rabbinic, liturgical, or philosophical texts. Sometimes, certain texts are selected and then studied through a lens of

⁷ Cardin, Nina. Out of the Depths I Call to You. London: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1992.

⁸ Gates of Healing was published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1988.

⁹ Weintraub, Simkha. Healing of Soul, Healing of Body. Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1995.

¹⁰ Glickman, Jeffrey. The Prayers and Praxis of Healing for the Contemporary Rabbinate. Dr. Robert Katz, referee, 1987. (Chapter 2).

Odell, Wesley. Toward a Recovery of Prayer: A Reform Response to Healing. Dr. Mark Washofsky, referee, 1994.

¹¹ The following publications apply the psychological approach to *bikkur cholim*. In the introduction to each, the editors and authors acknowledge their reliance on psychological models:

Katz, Nina Dublar. Yad L'Yad: A Training Manual for Bikkur Cholim Volunteers. New York: CCBC Press, 1992.

Katz, Robert L., Pastoral Care and the Jewish Tradition. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.

Yurow, Jane. Give Me Your Hand: A Practical Guide for Bikkur Cholim. Washington, D.C.: Adas Israel Congregation, 1988.

psychology, as is the case in Robert Katz's Pastoral Care in the Jewish Tradition.¹² Sometimes the texts from Jewish tradition are excerpted and cited as pretexts for the psychological theories. In either case, the texts are chosen because of their consistency with psychological theories.

A fourth category, consisting of *aggadic* materials, has not been subject to comprehensive examination. While specific passages have been studied in depth as literary pretexts of *bikkur cholim*,¹³ there has been no attempt to gather and analyze the non-legal, non-liturgical rabbinic texts which concern the practice of visiting the sick.

This chapter is devoted to the compilation and translation of the rabbinic literature concerning *bikkur cholim*. It is meant to lay the groundwork for the study of *aggadic* materials on the subject. While these texts have been used as both prooftexts and pretexts of *bikkur cholim*, that will not be the case in the initial chapters of this thesis. Rather, the texts will be approached without preconceived ideas of their intended message, purpose or utility. Before being subject to a process which is both dialogical and dialectical, the texts must first be allowed to stand on their own merit.

The passages selected for translation were compiled with the aid of computer searches, word and verse indexes, concordances, and cross-references from secondary sources. Each passage contains direct mention of visitation of the sick. References were sought in TaNaKh, commentaries to TaNaKh, Mishna, Tosephta, *halachic* and *aggadic midrashim*, and Talmud.

While Appendix A shows morphologies for the roots of the Hebrew term "*bikkur cholim*," the translations themselves are not semantic expositions. Rather, they are meant to present the materials in a form that is readable and accessible, while maintaining the integrity of the original text. The translations are literal wherever possible, but loose when absolutely necessary.

The texts are presented in chronological order, with a time line of approximate dates in Appendix B. Through construction of a chronology, it

¹² Ibid.

¹³ An unpublished essay by William Cutter examines the aggadic tale of Rabbi Judah's Handmaid. The essay uses the passage from Ketubot 104a as a prototype for showing the importance of story-telling for ethical and Jewish thinking.

will become easier to trace the development of *bikkur cholim* as it changes from early, rabbinic commentaries through later midrashic and talmudic literature. These translations facilitate the reconstruction of rabbinic ideas and ideals concerning the purpose of *bikkur cholim*, the nature of the *choleh*, and the roles and responsibilities of the *mevaker(et) cholim*. They allow extant materials to become gateways to a more thorough understanding of the mitzvah of *bikkur cholim*.

Rashi to Bereshit 18:1-2 :

Bereshit 18: 1) "And YHVH appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre, as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day. 2) and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and lo, three men stood over against him. "

"*And He appeared to him. . .*" to visit the sick. Said Rabbi Chama son of Chanina: It was the third day after his circumcision, and the Holy One Blessed be He came and inquired after his well being.

"*By the terebinths of Mamre. . .*" He who gave him advice concerning circumcision. Therefore, He revealed Himself to him in his territory.¹⁴

"*He sat. . .*" It is written, "he sat." He requested to stand but the Holy One Blessed be He said to him, "You sit, and I will stand, and you will be a symbol to your children. For in the future, I will stand myself in the assembly of judges, and they will sit. As it is written, "God stands in the assembly of God. In the midst of the judges He judges" (Tehillim 82:1).

"*At the tent door. . .*" To see if people were passing to and fro that he might enter them into his house.

"*In the heat of the day. . .*" The Holy One Blessed be He brought out the sun from its sheath so that Abraham would not be troubled by guests, but when he saw that Abraham was sorry that no guests had come, he brought angels to him in the guise of people.

"*And lo, three men. . .*" One to announce to Sarah (the birth of a son); one to overturn Sodom; and one to heal Abraham, so that a single angel would not have to deliver two messages.¹⁵ Know that this is so because throughout the

¹⁴ According to rabbinic tradition, it was Mamre who had advised Abraham concerning the circumcision. See *Bereshit Rabbah* 48.

passage, all of the language is in the plural form. "... and they ate..." (v. 8); "... and they said to him..." (v. 9); but in the case of the announcement, it says, "And He said, I will certainly return to you..." (v. 10), and in the case of the overturn of Sodom it says, "For I cannot do anything..." (Bereshit 19:22), and "that I will not overturn" (Bereshit 19:21). Raphael, who healed Abraham, went from there to rescue Lot. That explains why it says, "And it came to pass when they had brought them forth that he said, flee for your life" (Bereshit 19:17). You learn from this that only one of these acted as deliverer.¹⁶

"*Stood over against him...*" meaning before him, but this is a more appropriate choice for speaking of angels.

"*And looked...*" What does the repetition of the word "*vayar*" imply? The first time it has its simplest meaning ("he looked"), the second is that of understanding. He saw that they stood in one spot, and so he understood that they did not wish to cause him harm. Even though they knew that he would go to meet them, they stayed where they were out of respect for him and to show him that they wanted to avoid troubling him. So, he took the initiative and ran to them. In Baba Metzia (86b), the following is written, "... they were standing by him..." and it is also written, "... he ran to them..." How can these contradictory statements be reconciled? By the explanation that at first they stood by him, but when they saw that he was loosening and binding his bandages, they retreated from him, so he immediately ran toward them.

Rashi to Bereshit 21:17

Bereshit 21: 17 "And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her: What is with you, Hagar? Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is."

"*And God heard the voice of the lad...*" From here we see that the prayer of the sick person is better than that which others pray for him and it is accepted first.

¹⁵ See Bereshit Rabbah 50, Vilna edition.

¹⁶ Bereshit Rabbah 50:2 further explains that healing and rescue form a single mission, therefore a fourth angel is not required.

Rashi to Yechezkiel 34:11

*Yechezkiel 34:11 For thus said my Lord God: Here I am, I will search for my sheep and examine them.*¹⁷

"(I will search for my sheep) and visit them. . ." For me there will be bikkur cholim.

Ramban to Bereshit 18:1-2

"And YHVH appeared to him. . ." Rashi comments: To visit the sick man. Said Rabbi Chama son of Chanina, 'It was the third day after his circumcision and the Holy One Blessed be He came and inquired after his well-being. *"And lo, three men. . ."* angels who came to him in the form of men. *"Three. . ."* One to announce to Sarah, one to heal Abraham, and one to overturn Sodom. Raphael, who healed Abraham, went from there to rescue Lot, for these do not constitute two missions. This is because the second mission was in another place, and he was commanded thereon after.¹⁸

(Translator's Note: At this point, Ramban delves into a discussion of dreams and visions in TaNaKh. He distinguishes between prophetic and non-prophetic visions. Ramban concludes that Abraham did, indeed, receive prophecy, but only after undergoing circumcision. Using Vayikra Rabbah to Vayikra 1:1 as proof-text, Ramban explains that Moses was prepared for prophecy at birth, but Abraham had to prepare his soul to perceive the angel through the act of circumcision. Ramban resumes interest in bikkur cholim with the following passages:)

¹⁷ The root BKR can mean to examine or to visit. *U'vikartim* translates as "and examine them" or "and visit them".

¹⁸ After Raphael had completed the first mission (healing Abraham), he was sent on a new mission in another place (rescuing Lot). Since the two missions were not simultaneous, the principle of one angel carrying out two missions does not apply (Mizrachi's commentary on Rashi).

Now here is the interpretation of this passage. After it says that "*in the same day Abraham was circumcised*" (Bereshit 17:26), it says that God appeared to him while he was sick from the circumcision as he was sitting and cooling himself in his tent door on account of the heat of the day which weakened him. Torah mentions this in order to inform us that Abraham had no intention to prophesy. He had neither fallen on his face nor prayed, nevertheless this vision came to him.

At times the appearance of the Shekhinah comes in a moment of anger, as mentioned in the verse, "*And the whole congregation called for stoning them with stones, when the glory of God appeared in the tent of meeting to the children of Israel*" (Bamidbar 14:10). That was for the protection of his righteous servants and their honor.

Do not be concerned about the interruption of the portion, because the subjects are connected. For that reason, the verse says, "*And He appeared to him* . . ." It does not say, "*And God appeared to Abraham*." Because the present chapter (vayeira), wishes to give an account of the honor that was bestowed upon him at the time he performed the circumcision, and it tells that the Shekhinah appeared to him and sent him His angels to announce to his wife, and also to save his relative Lot on his account. Abraham had already been informed by the Shekhinah concerning the birth of a son, and Sarah was now informed by word of the angel who spoke with Abraham in order that Sarah should hear, even as it says, "*And Sarah heard*" (Bereshit 18:10).

This is the intent of the sages' saying, "*God came to visit the sick man*" (Baba Metzia 86 b), meaning that it was not for the purpose of some utterance but as a mark of honor to him.

They have also said, "*You shall make an altar of earth unto Me*" (Bereshit Rabbah 48:4, citing Shemot 20:24). If any person just built an altar to My name, he is assured that I will appear unto him and bless him. All the more is such assurance given to Abraham who circumcised himself for My name.

The remark ("*God came to visit the sick man*") indicates that the vision of the Shekhinah was a cure for his sickness on account of the circumcision, for so it should be, as it is written, "*In the light of the King's countenance is life*" (Mishlei 16:15).

Bereshit Rabbah 8:13

Said Rabbi Abahu: The Holy One Blessed be He filled a cup of blessing and blessed them.¹⁹

Said R. Yehuda son of R. Simon: Michael and Gabriel were the first man's (Adam's) attendants.

Said R. Simlai: We find that the Holy One Blessed be He blesses bridegrooms, adorns brides, visits the sick, buries the dead, and recites blessings for mourners.

He blesses bridegrooms; where is the prooftext? Bereshit 1:28, "*And He blessed them.*"

He visits the sick; where is the prooftext? Bereshit 18:1, "*And He appeared to him at the terebinths of Mamre.*"

He buries the dead; where is the prooftext? Devarim 34:6, "*And he buried him in the valley.*"

Said R. Shmuel ben Nachman in the name of R. Yochanan: He even visits mourners, as it is written in Bereshit 35:9, "*And God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him.*"

With what blessing did he bless him? R. Yonatan says: With the blessing of mourners.

¹⁹ Commenting on Bereshit 1:28, following God's creation of man and woman. "And God blessed them and God said to them: Be fruitful and multiply, replenish the earth and subdue it."

Bereshit Rabbah 49:4²⁰

Bereshit 18: 19) "Shall I hide from Abraham that which I am doing, seeing that Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed with him? 20) For I have known him to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord to do tzedakkah and mishpat, to the end that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He has promised to him."

"For I have known him. . ." Rabbi Yudan in the name of Rabbi Alexander said that the verses refer to hospitality, but the Rabbis say that they refer to visiting the sick.

R. Azariah said in the name of R. Judah: It begins with "tzedakkah" and follows with "mishpat." How should we understand this? Abraham used to receive travellers and wayfarers. After they had eaten and drunk, he would say to them, "Say a blessing!"

They asked, "What shall we say?"

He responded, "Blessed be the Lord of the Universe of whose bounty we have partaken."

If (the guest) took it upon himself to say the blessing, he would eat, drink, and depart. If (the guest) did not take it upon himself to say the blessing, then (Abraham) would say to him, "Give me what you owe me."

"What do I owe you?"

"A pint of wine costs 10 cents. A pound of meat costs 10 cents. A loaf of bread costs 10 cents. Who will give you wine in the wilderness? Who will give you meat in the wilderness? Who will give you bread in the wilderness?"

When (the guest) saw that he was outsmarted, he would say, "Blessed be the Lord of the Universe of whose bounty we have partaken."

Hence, "tzedakkah" preceeds "mishpat."

²⁰ Bereshit Rabbah 49 corresponds to parashat vayeira. The general theme of the midrash is Abraham's righteousness and God's trust of Abraham. The passages translated here concern the topic of bikkur cholim, and are in commentary to Bereshit 18:19-20.

Vayikra Rabbah 13:2 (Parashat Shemini)²¹

R. Tanhum ben Hanilai said: This may be compared to the case of a doctor who went to visit two sick people, one who would live, and another who would die. To the one who would live, he said, "This you may eat. This you may not eat." To the one who would die, he said, "Give to him whatever he requests."

So, too, for the heathen who are not destined for life in the World to Come, it is written, "*Every moving thing that lives will be food for you*" (Bereshit 9:3), but to Israel, who are destined for life in the World to Come, (God said), "*These are the living things which you may eat. . .*" (Devarim 14:4).

Bamidbar Rabbah 18:12 (Parashat Korach)

Bamidbar 16: 28) And Moses said, "Through this you will know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works, for I have not done them of my own mind. 29) If these men die the common death of all men, or if they be visited after the visitation of all men, then the Lord has not sent me."

To what may this be compared? To the one appointed to look after the marriage interests of a certain king's daughter. He had evidence of her virginity in his possession. One of the wedding guests stood up and cursed him saying that the king's daughter had no virginity. He rose before the king and said, "If you do not claim redress for the insult offered to you and refuse to have this guest taken out and executed publicly, I shall also believe that no virginity has been found in the king's daughter."

The king thought, "Is it better that I should slay the guest than that the one appointed to look after my daughter's marriage interests should spread malicious gossip about my daughter?"

²¹ Vayikra Rabbah 13 attempts to provide justification for the laws of kashrut. It poses the question, "Why are the Israelites saddled with the burden of dietary laws, while other nations are not?" The midrash responds that the Israelites had a greater ability to endure the commandments than the other nations. The translated passage illustrates this point through an example of bikkur cholim. The entire passage is repeated in Midrash Tanchuma to Shemini.

Likewise with Korah. He contended with Moses and said that Moses had invented all these things from his own mind and on his own initiative. Moses said to the Holy One Blessed be he, "If these people die in their beds as people ordinarily do, doctors coming in and visiting them in the same way as all other sick people are visited, I shall also become a heretic and say, *"The Lord has not sent me."*

Kohelet Rabbah 7:8

Some time (after becoming a heretic), Elisha ben Abuya became ill, and R. Meir was told that he was sick. He went to visit him and said, "Repent."

He asked, "Having gone so far astray, will I be accepted?"

R. Meir replied, "Is it not written, *'Thou turnest man to contrition'* (Tehillim 110:3).

Then Elisha b. Abuya wept and died. R. Meir rejoiced, saying, "My master seems to have departed in a mood of repentance!"

Midrash Tehillim, Mizmor 25:11²²

"All the paths/ways of YHVH are mercy and truth, unto such who keep his covenant and testimonies" (Mizmor 25:10).

"All the paths/ways of YHVH are mercy and truth. . ." (Mizmor 25:10).

This could be the case for all, but the sages say that it is specifically for those who keep His covenant. Another possible interpretation of *"All of God's ways"* - At the moment that the Holy One Blessed be He said to Moses, *"Go, say to Israel, 'Follow after the Lord your God'"* (Devarim 13:5), they said to Moses our Teacher, "But who can walk after him? Is it not written, *'God's path is in whirlwind and storm'* (Nahum 1:3), and also, *'Your way was in the sea and your path in the great waters (and your footsteps were not known)'* (Tehillim 77:20)?"

²² This passage is repeated in Midrash Tanchuma to Parashat Vayishlach.

(Moses) said to them, "Fine. I will tell you the ways of the Holy One Blessed be He. *'All of the ways of YHVH are mercy and truth'* (Tehillim 25:10).

'Mercy' refers to acts of G'milut Chasadim. 'Truth' is Torah."

"Unto such who keep His covenant and His testimonies" (Tehillim 25: 10).

Said Rav Simlai: We find that the Holy One Blessed be He adorns brides, accompanies bridegrooms, visits the sick, and accompanies the dead.

Adorns brides and accompanies the bridegroom; where is the prooftext?

"And the Lord God fashioned the rib that he had taken from man into a woman. . ." (Bereshit 2:22). This teaches that the Holy One Blessed be He braided Eve's hair and brought her to Adam, hence, in the large cities along the Mediterranean, brides are called "adorned-ones."

Visits the sick; where is the prooftext? *"And God appeared to him in the terebinths of Mamre"* (Bereshit 18:1).

And accompanies the dead, as it is written, *"And he buried him"* (Devarim 34:6).

Midrash Mishlei 27:18

"He who tends a fig tree will enjoy its fruit" (Mishlei 27:18). Said R. Levi: If a person persists in the study of Torah in this world, he will eat its fruits in the world to come. There they taught: These are the things without measure-bringing first fruits, g'milut chassadim, and study of Torah.

And these are the things that a person eats its fruits in this world, but the reward comes to him in the world to come: honoring father and mother, g'milut chassadim, making peace between a man and his neighbor, visiting the sick, regular prayer, attending the house of study, and the study of Torah is equal to them all, hence it is written, *"He who tends a fig tree will enjoy its fruit"* (Mishlei 27:18).

Midrash Tanchuma 12:12 (Toledot)

"And Isaac trembled very much" (Bereshit 27:33). This relates to *"The hearing ear and the seeing eye. God has made them both"* (Mishlei 20:12). For the Holy One Blessed be He did not make ear and eye, alone. Did He not also make other body parts on the human? *"The hearing ear. . ."* refers to three body parts

which the Holy One Blessed be He placed under man's control and the three body parts which He did not place under his control. Parts which are under his control are the hands, the mouth, and the feet. When a person wants to use his hands for the sake of heaven, he can make use of sukkah, lulav, shofar, tzitzit, tefillin, and mezuzot. Similarly, if he wants to steal or spill blood, or transgress commandments, and perform other sinful acts, he can. If he wants to use his mouth for Torah study, or for speaking words of blessing, praise, and supplication, he can. When he wants to speak malicious gossip, or slander, or bear false witness, he can. He can spring to his feet to visit the sick, comfort the mourner, accompany the dead, and perform g'milut chassadim, or he can leap to murder, adultery, and incest.

Parts which are not under his control are the nose, the eye, and the ear. If a person is passing through the market where people are burning incense for idolatry, he will smell it even if he does not wish to. Likewise, if a person is passing through the market and witnesses a person sinning, he will see it, even if he does not wish to. If he is walking along and he hears a person profaning God, he will see it, even though he does not want to.

Talmud Nedarim 39b

It is taught: There is no measure for visiting the sick. What is meant by, "there is no measure for visiting the sick"? R. Joseph thought to explain it, "Its reward is unlimited."

Said Abaye to him, "Is there a definite measure of reward for any precept? We learned: Be as heedful of a light precept as of a serious one, for you do not know the grant of reward for precepts."

Abaye explained it, "Even a great person must visit a humble one."

Raba added, "Even a hundred times a day."

R. Abba bar R. Chanina said, "He who visits a sick person takes away one sixtieth of his illness."

Talmud Nedarim 40a

R. Helbo fell ill. Threupon R. Kahana went and proclaimed, "R. Helbo is sick!" No one came to visit him.

R. Kahana rebuked the scholars, saying, "Did it not once happen that one of R. Akiva's disciples fell ill, and the Sages did not visit him, whereupon R. Akiva himself entered the sick man's house. Because he took care to sweep the floor clean, the sick disciple recovered. 'My Master,' he said, 'You have revived me.' R. Akiva immediately went forth and taught the following: 'Whoever does not visit the sick is like a shedder of blood' . . .

Talmud Berachot 5b

Rabbi Eliezer got sick. Rabbi Yochanan came to see him.²³ He saw that he was sleeping in a dark house. He uncovered his arm and light fell. He saw that Rabbi Eliezer was crying.

He said to him, "Why are you crying? Is it because you did not study more Torah? Well, if that is the case, then remember the saying which we study in Mishna: *One person may study a lot, and another person studies only a little, but the thing that really matters is that one's heart is directed toward heaven.* Or is it on account of lack of food? Well then, remember, not everyone can set two tables. Or is it on account of lacking children? Well, this is the bone of my tenth son."

Eliezer said to him, "That this beauty will perish in dust, for this I am crying."

Yochanan answered, "I see. For this, surely you cry." And the both of them cried together.

In the meantime, R. Yochanan said to R. Eliezer, "Are your sufferings dear to you?"

R. Eliezer said, "Neither them nor their reward."

R. Yochanan said, "Give me your hand."

He gave him his hand and he raised him.

²³ Rabbi Yochanan was noted for his great beauty (Baba Metziah 84a)."

Chapter Two

Letting the Texts Speak to Us

Part A: The Visitor

Arthur Waskow speaks of our relation to Jewish texts as Godwrestling,¹ being engaged in both fighting and loving. A purpose of our interaction with Jewish texts is to discover the meanings imbedded in them by those who have transmitted them to us. To accomplish this, one engages in a process called "exegesis," which comes from the Greek, meaning "to read out."

Exegesis involves the close reading of a text, followed by an analysis of it in its literary and/or historical contexts. It requires the interpreter to carefully consider the text's structure and genre; and its narrative, literary, historical, and sociological settings. The use of critical tools in exegesis helps to ensure that we do not merely read ourselves into a text. Through the process of exegesis we strive to "listen to the text," and enter the world that it brings.

When reading a Jewish text, interpreters frequently ask themselves, "How can this text help me to understand myself and my world?" or "How can this text lend strength to my current homily or belief?" The borrowing of verses from Jewish writings for use as prooftexts in homilies or tools for inspiration can be valid and proper. Interpreters who mold texts according to their own preconceptions engage in a legitimate process called "eisegesis." My research focuses on exegesis as its primary method of gaining insight into texts.

This rabbinic thesis presupposes that the more one concentrates on understanding the text, the more one can understand oneself or one's beliefs

¹ Waskow, Arthur. Godwrestling. New York: Schocken Books, 1978.

in relation to it. By examining a text with an eye toward its intent, an interpreter does not become a *tabula rasa*. The exegetical process, however, requires interpreters to be aware of their biases and willing to suspend them at times.

"Letting the texts speak to us" is the term used in this paper to describe the exegetical process of examining a text with an eye toward its intent. The exegetical process is primarily dialectical, but it is also dialogical. One examines the text as a scientist might examine a specimen, but one also asks certain questions of the text, which might lead to greater understanding of its intention. "Talking back to the text" is the process of using a text that has been analyzed for purposes of self understanding.

In this chapter, we will let the texts speak to us regarding the one who visits the sick. As we listen to the texts, we must recognize that rabbinic literature is complex and evolving. The passages which I have excerpted represent layers upon layers of subtext. No single meaning or intention can be distilled from a given excerpt. One could say that each passage is, itself, an example of the dialectical and dialogical process that takes place when one enters the world of biblical or rabbinic literature.

No biblical texts directly address the matter of *bikkur cholim*. The term "*bikkur cholim*" comes into use during the rabbinic period. When the Bible mentions illness or specific persons who are ill, the sickness usually represents punishment for known misdeeds. The Bible concerns itself with instructions for isolating the *choleh*, and attempts to restore the *choleh* to God's favor. Visitors to the ill play an insignificant role in the Bible.

People die in Torah, but Torah places little emphasis on the disease which caused a person's death. The deaths of the Patriarchs, the Matriarchs, Moses,

and others, do not include tales of illness. Illness, in Torah, implies punishment for misdeeds, as opposed to a natural state of being.

On the rare occasion that Torah mentions illness, protocol dictates isolation, not visitation. When Miriam is struck with leprosy in Bamidbar 11, the passage explains her illness as a punishment. God prohibits visitation, commanding the people to place her under quarantine for seven days.

The biblical portions, *Tazria* (Vayikra 12 and 13) and *Metzora* (Vayikra 14 and 15) detail God's commandments for the diagnosis and treatment of those afflicted with leprosy. Once a priest determines that a person is diseased, "the priest shall shut away the one that has the plague for seven days" (Vayikra 13:4). The unafflicted avoid the afflicted like the plague, so to speak!

First Kings includes a passage concerning King David's last days. As King David lay dying, Avishag the Shulamite is sent to attend to him. This passage, while technically an example of care for the ill, has a literary importance far removed from the subject of *bikkur cholim*. Namely, the passage is an illustration of David's deterioration due to age, and his loss of strength. David, once a strong warrior, lover, and king, lies beside a fair maiden, sexually impotent and powerless over the inevitable battle over succession to his throne. The account of David's final illness does not develop into a Jewish resource for understanding *bikkur cholim*.

The Book of Job stands alone as a biblical tale of a person who is visited by friends during a time of illness. The Book of Job, however, emphasizes questions of theodicy. Job's illness provides a context for the discourse concerning why bad things happen to good people. The Book of Job never finds its way into the corpus of Jewish literature on *bikkur cholim*.

The main biblical text out of which rabbinic literature concerning *bikkur cholim* evolves is *Parashat Vayera*, particularly Genesis 18:1-2. The passage

follows on the heels of the account of Abraham's circumcision. It begins with the statement that God appeared to Abraham by the terebinths of Mamre, as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day. Abraham sees three men standing before him, and treats them very hospitably. The men announce that Sara will give birth to a son, and Sara laughs. The passage concludes with Abraham and the three men walking in the direction of Sodom. After the visit of the three men, the Bible tells the tale of Sodom and Gemorra.

Rabbinic use of *Vayera* as the biblical basis for *bikkur cholim* presents a certain irony. The passage does not overtly tell the tale of a person who is ill. The biblical text does not explicitly mention that the three men have come for the purpose of *bikkur cholim*. The annunciation of Isaac's birth appears to explain the purpose of their visit.

Nevertheless, Rashi, in the name of Rabbi Chama bar Chanina, explains that the passage is an early example of *bikkur cholim*. Rashi notes that the verse concerning God's appearance to Abraham occurs right after the verses that tell of Abraham's circumcision. The textual proximity of the two events leads Rashi to believe that they have a causal relationship. Abraham is a *choleh* recovering from surgery, therefore God comes to inquire after his well-being.

Rashi further associates God's appearance with Abraham's circumcision through the passage's use of the word "Mamre." In the context of *Vayera*, "Mamre" is a place name. According to Bereshit Rabba 48, a man named Mamre had advised Abraham concerning the circumcision. Rashi reads *Vayera* through the lens of a midrashic tradition.

Rashi's commentary to *Vayera* represents the earliest literary usage of the term "*bikkur cholim*." His commentary serves as a primary source for many subsequent rabbinic writings on *bikkur cholim*. Ramban to Bereshit

18:1-2 draws upon Rashi's commentary to *Vayera*. Bereshit Rabba 8:13, Midrash Tehillim Mizmor 25:11, and Midrash Tanchuma to *parashat Vayishlach* all utilize *Vayera* as a prooftext for the value of *bikkur cholim*. Bereshit Rabba 49:4 builds upon the belief that God's visit to Abraham is an act of *bikkur cholim*. While other biblical texts have been interpreted in terms of *bikkur cholim*, *parashat Vayera* developed into the primary source of the rabbinic justification of *bikkur cholim*.

One source out of which many aggadic materials on *bikkur cholim* evolved are the various codes of charitable conduct. During the rabbinic period, scholars frequently sought to distill the essence of Jewish teaching into legal codes. These codes provide insight into what the rabbis deemed to be the most important obligations of a pious Jew. Although exact wording may vary from one code to the next, typical obligations included honoring parents, accompanying the dead, adorning brides, prayer, study, and visiting the sick. Bereshit Rabba 8:13, Midrash Tehillim Mizmor 25:11, Midrash Mishlei 27:18, Midrash Tanchuma 12:12, and Talmud Nedarim 39b all represent aggadot which developed out of codes of charitable conduct.

Literary sources on *bikkur cholim* do not indicate why the practice was valued during the rabbinic period, while virtually non-existent in the biblical era. Why the codes of charitable conduct include *bikkur cholim* but the Bible contains no comparable instruction, remains unknown. Why the Levitical priests banished diseased persons, but the rabbis sought them out seems puzzling.

Non-Jewish texts contemporaneous to Bible and Midrash follow the same trend with respect to *bikkur cholim*. Sumerian and Babylonian mythologies show no interest in treatment of the ill. There is no extant literature from the

biblical period, which presents a perspective on disease which contrasts with that of Torah.

No scholarly books or articles have been written on the subject of visiting the ill in the Ancient Near East. An article by Robert Biggs² indicates that what we know of ancient Mesopotamian practices concerning treatment of the ill comes from letters, literature, and an occasional "medical prescription." The "medical prescriptions" tended to be home remedies for common maladies caused by overexposure to heat or cold, eating spoiled foods, or drinking too much alcohol.

Deeply rooted in Mesopotamian thought was the view that illness was punishment sent by the gods because of offenses committed by the sick person. Medical and magical treatments were combined. Prayers and incantations were said by the afflicted. The only visitors to the ill that we know of were exorcists or sorcerers. These faith healers used ritual and magic as their primary prescriptions.

Just as aggadot of the rabbinic period view *bikkur cholim* as a noble endeavor, so too, do the Christian Scriptures of the same period value visitation of the sick. While the rabbis told tales of God and great rabbis or healers seeking out the afflicted, the Gospel writers told stories about Jesus, his visits to lepers and actions as a healer of broken bodies and spirits.

One can assume that diseases were equally contagious during the biblical and rabbinic eras. Both biblical and rabbinic societies understood physical ailments as punishment for moral misconduct. Illness was prevalent during both time periods.

² Biggs, Robert. "Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health in Ancient Mesopotamia." Encyclopedia of Religion. New York: MacMillan, 1987, 1911.

The literature of the two eras indicates a distinct change in attitude and practice. Visitation of the sick was not a suitable literary theme to biblical audiences. The literature of the biblical period depicts heroes and kings as strong, not diseased. It portrays diseased persons as ritually unclean. The community isolated its sick until a priest could approve their re-entry into the sacred community.

Literature from the biblical era characterizes the diseased as far from God. Their very presence could threaten a community's spiritual well-being. The sick were shunned or pitied, but certainly not enobled, at least insofar as the literature demonstrates.

During the rabbinic period, stories of God and the Godly attending to sick persons became prevalent. Tales of great teachers humbling themselves through visits to the sick gained popularity. Literature concerning miraculous healings interested audiences of that era. While the commonfolk might have felt repulsed by disease, the societal ideal was visitation of the afflicted.

Visitation of the sick came to be seen as an important obligation of every person in the community. Talmud Nedarim 39b teaches that there is no measure for visiting the sick. Failure to attend to the sick could put one out of God's favor. Talmud Nedarim 40a declares that those who did not visit the sick could be equated with murderers. The sick were to be attended to as part of a desire to imitate and serve God.

By viewing the aggadic materials in chronological order, beginning with the older texts, we see God is the primary visitor in the earlier texts. The later texts concern human visitors to the ill. In representing God as the earliest figure to attend to the sick, the rabbis lend legitimacy to the practice of *bikkur cholim*. They imbue the action with a sense of Godliness. They provide a model

for proper human behavior, and they present a God who is loving, caring, and compassionate.

In the earliest *bikkur cholim* text, God visits Abraham after his circumcision (Rashi to Bereshit 18:1-2). God inquires after Abraham's well being. God tells Abraham to sit, even though Abraham offers to stand. God explains that Tehillim 82:1 requires God to stand as counsel of the judges.

Rashi alludes to God's great compassion by telling the reader that God tried to spare Abraham the burden of visitors during his recovery. God sent the angels, however, when he saw that Abraham felt disappointed by the lack of guests. Ever the considerate guests, the angels avert their eyes from Abraham when he changes his bandages, so as not to embarrass him. They allow Abraham to run toward them.

Rashi artfully explains the difficulties of the passage, providing justification for each word, each detail, every seemingly extraneous description, and every inconsistency in the biblical text. He does so in such a way that God appears as the ideal visitor, concerned for the welfare of the *choleh*, and sensitive to his needs. With an economy of language characteristic of his style, Rashi creates for his reader a world of understanding the nature of God, the *Vayera* text, and appropriate guidelines of *bikkur cholim*.

In Rashi to Bereshit 21:17, God, once again, shows a special compassion for the afflicted. As Rashi read the biblical text, he wondered why it is written that "God heard the voice of the lad," when it was Hagar who wept her despair when banished to the wilderness. Rashi explains that God hears the afflicted first, responding to prayers offered by the sick before the prayers of others. In other words, God has a special sense of compassion for the ill, and a sense of urgency in attending to their prayers.

In Rashi to Yechezkiel 34:11, Rashi responds to a double entendre in the biblical text. Because the root BKR can mean "to examine" or "to visit," Rashi moved beyond the simplest meaning of the passage. Instead of acting as an authority who "examines" his people for blemishes, God is here depicted as one who "visits" his people when they are ill and in need of care. Rashi shows God saying unequivocally, "From me there will be *bikkur cholim*" (Rashi to Yechezkiel 34:11).

Ramban to Bereshit 18:1-2 expounds on Rashi's commentary to the same passage. On the subject of *bikkur cholim*, Ramban emphasizes that God visits the sick as a mark of honor. In Abraham's case, God's visit in no way implied a desire to help Abraham to prophecy. Rather, the visit, in and of itself, was sufficient reason to appear to Abraham after the circumcision. God visits the sick, then, as an act of love and caring, not as a guise for conducting other types of business.

Bereshit Rabbah 8:13 further depicts God as a model of *gemilut chassadim*. The passage is a compilation of prooftexts, which illustrate that God performs righteous acts that people are also expected to perform. Bereshit 18:1 is used as the prooftext of God's performance of *bikkur cholim*. The writer of Bereshit Rabbah 8:13 reads the verse through the lens of rabbinic commentary. Rashi's commentary to Bereshit 18:1 became so strongly tied to the biblical text that the writer of the Bereshit Rabbah passage need only cite "and He appeared to him at the terebinths of Mamre" as prooftext.

Later texts emphasize human visitors to the ill. Human visitors include doctors, famous rabbis, and ordinary people. Some passages regarding human visitors lend insight into rabbinic attitudes toward care and treatment of the ill. Others simply use the visit to the ill as a setting for discourse unrelated to issues of illness.

Bereshit Rabbah 49:4 is built upon *parashat Vayera*. Its emphasis is Bereshit 18:19-20. In those verses, God says that has known Abraham, and can trust Abraham to command his children and his household to keep God's way and do *tzedakkah* and *mishpat*. The commentator wonders what God means when he says, "For I have known him."

Rashi's comments to *Vayera* would lead one to believe that God knew Abraham through God's visit to him following the circumcision, the classic example of *bikkur cholim*. The author of the passage acknowledges Rashi's perspective, but then presents a new aggadah which emphasizes Abraham's sense of hospitality.

Ultimately, the passage demonstrates Abraham's righteousness and responds to the question as to why the word *tzedakkah* preceeds the word *mishpat* in the biblical parasha. Through a tale of how Abraham cunningly persuades his guests to believe in God, we learn that one should fulfill one's obligations to others first, and then exact justice.

The author of the midrash departs from the accepted model of understanding *Vayera* as a tale of *bikkur cholim*. Because the text of *Vayera* was believed to be a *bikkur cholim* text, the author of the midrash acknowledges it as such before introducing a new perspective.

Vayikra Rabbah 13:2 tells about a doctor who visits the ill. This passage does not draw from *Vayera* or from the codes of charitable conduct. Its basis is in talmudic texts concerning medical ethics. When a sick person seems likely to recover, rabbinic ethics dictate that care should be taken with respect to what the person eats and drinks. The doctor must facilitate the person's return to physical health through the prescription of a proper diet.

When a sick person approaches death and proper diet cannot alleviate his destiny, rabbinic ethics dictate that he should eat what he pleases. Since the

doctor cannot improve upon the patient's physical state, the doctor is obligated to help the patient to enjoy his last few days. In Vayikra Rabbah 13:2, this accepted practice of a doctor who visits the ill is used as a metaphor for God's expectation that Jews observe *kashrut*. The heathen is likened to a dying man. Not destined for Eternal Life, he can eat any living thing, according to God's instruction to Adam in Eden. The children of Israel, however, are likened to the person who has the potential to live. Destined for Eternal life, the Israelite may eat only those foods permitted to him in Devarim 14:4.

Physicians appear as regular visitors to the ill during rabbinic times. Bamidbar Rabbah 18:12 alludes to the prevalence of doctors by showing Moses' anger at the possibility that the rebellious in his community be treated with the same compassion due to those who die of illness. He admonishes God not to allow the rebels to "die in their beds as people ordinarily do, doctors coming in and visiting them in the same way as all other sick people are visited. . ."

From a modern perspective, the presence of physicians in the home of a sick person might seem insignificant. What is significant about the presence of doctors in rabbinic literature is the observation that the physicians could not be distinguished from faith healers before the rabbinic era.³ Interest in science and human biology did not develop before the Common Era. Priests or faith healers attended to the ill, and the sick usually sought them out, not the reverse. The role of the physician in visiting the ill and discussions concerning medical ethics appear first in Jewish writings during the rabbinic era.

Rabbinic literature condones the work of the physician. The physician, as healer, acts in fulfillment of God's commandments. By participating in

³ Ibid.

healing works, the physician engages in *gemilut chasadim*, actions which we perform as a means of imitating God. The following passage offers one proof-text for the right of the physician to practice medicine:

The school of Rabbi Ishmael says, "Heal he shall heal" (Exodus 21:18-19). What do we learn from the repetition of the word "heal"? That authorization was granted to the physician to heal (B. Talmud, Baba Kamma 85a).

Maimonides Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Rotzeach, 1:14, emphasizes that physicians have not only a right to practice medicine, but an obligation:

Whoever is able to save another and does not save him, transgresses the commandment, "Neither shalt thou stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor" (Vayikra 19:16).

In Shulkhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 336, Joseph Caro writes:

The Torah placed it within the providence of the physician to heal. It is a commandment, and it is included in the category of saving life. If a physician withholds his services, it is considered as shedding blood.

Finally, Otzar HaMidrashim, Volume II, includes an aggadah which depicts the physician as a special *mevaker cholim*. The passage reads:

Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Akiva were walking through the streets of Jerusalem and met a sick man.

The ill person asked, "Masters, tell me how I can be cured."

They answered, "Do this and that until you are cured."

He said to them, "Who afflicted me?"

"The Holy One," they replied.

He said, "And you interfered with a matter of life that is not your concern? God afflicted and you wish to heal?"

The rabbis asked, "What is your vocation?"

He responded, "I am a tiller of soil. Here is my vine-cutter in my hand."

They asked, "Who created the vineyard?"

"The Holy One," he answered.

"You interfered in this vineyard which is not yours? God created it and you cut away its fruits?" they asked.

"Do you not see the vine-cutter in my hands? Were I not to go out and plow and till and fertilize and weed, the vineyard would not produce fruit."

They said, "Fool! From your own work you have not learned what is written in Psalms 103:15, 'As for man, his days are as grass.' Just as the tree, if not weeded, fertilized, and ploughed will not grow and bring forth its fruits, so it is with the human body. The fertilizer is the medicine and the healing means, and the tiller of the earth is the physician.

(pp. 580-581)

Physicians, then, visited the sick. As far as the rabbinic community was concerned, they had God's approval, and a communal obligation. Through their visits and their study of medicine, physicians developed new medicines and treatments for various ailments.

The advance of medical remedies for certain illnesses did not irradicate the rabbi's interest in the state of a patient's faith. While they encouraged the dying to eat whatever they wanted,⁴ they did not leave heretics to die believing whatever they wanted. The rabbis concerned themselves with the souls of the dying, and did everything they could to extract a final confession from the dying.

Kohelet Rabbah 7:8 illustrates the rabbinic interest in death bed reversals of faith. When the famous heretic, Elisha ben Abuya became ill Rabbi Meir went to visit him to convince him to repent. The great Rabbi Meir succeeded in his mission, and Elisha ben Abuya died in a state of repentance. The fact that even a most infamous heretic could return to God is an illustration of the

⁴ Vayikra Rabbah 13,

rabbinic belief that the gates of repentance are always open, even until the moment before death.

Midrash Tehillim, mizmor 25:11, shows God performing acts of *g'milut chassadim*. While Jews are expected to imitate God, the rabbinic literature generally personifies God engaged in ideal human behaviors. Midrash Tehillim includes a compilation of prooftexts which show that God does all of the righteous acts the people are expected to do, including visiting the sick.

Midrash Mishlei 27:18 presents a list of righteous acts for which one will receive merit in the world to come. The list is not identical to the list of acts that God performs in Midrash Tehillim. The two lists do share *bikkur cholim* as a righteous act of both God and humanity. Midrash Mishlei does not include adorning the bride and accompanying the dead in its list of actions for which one reaps an eternal reward. Visiting the sick is the only action that both lists consider important enough to consider essential.

Categorization of mitzvot occupied the attention of many great scholars and rabbis. Some thinkers, including Maimonides, divided mitzvot into *chukim* and *mishpatim*, commandments whose reason is not apparent and commandments whose reason is obvious. Mitzvot are frequently categorized with respect to whether they are time bound or not bound by time, positive or negative, place bound or not bound by place.

Midrash Tanchuma 12:12 follows in the genre of categorizing mitzvot, dividing mitzvot into commandments which a person can freely choose to observe, and those over which a person has no control. Visiting the sick falls into the category of mitzvot which a person can freely choose to observe. A person who wishes to avoid idolatry, however, becomes an accidental accomplice to it when he walks through a market and smells incense that has been burned as part of a pagan ritual.

Midrash Tanchuma's division of mitzvot (and sin) into the voluntary and the involuntary, lends strength to the importance of *bikkur cholim*. Because one has control over one's hands and feet, one has the ability to visit the sick. If one has the physical ability to do so, then there can be no good excuse for failing to observe the commandment.

Some midrashim emphasize extraordinary visitors, such as doctors or great rabbis. The majority of midrashim about human visitors, however, stress the obligation upon ordinary Jews to visit the sick. Talmud Nedarim 39b and 40a illustrate this principle through oft-quoted aphorisms and memorable anecdotes.

Talmud Nedarim 39b details a discussion of the meaning of the teaching, "There is no measure for visiting the sick." The rabbis debate whether the reward for visiting the sick is immeasurable or whether one is obligated to visit the sick repeatedly, without limiting one's visits to people of a certain stature.

The text concludes that observance of any precept, including *bikkur cholim*, holds the promise of eternal rewards. With respect to the specific injunction concerning *bikkur cholim*, one is required to visit persons regardless of their social class. Rabba adds that one should visit "even a hundred times a day."

One can assume that Rabba was using exaggeration as a tool for teaching his perspective. Neither the legal nor the aggadic literature concerning *bikkur cholim* lead one to believe that the amoraim spent their days running in and out of the homes of the afflicted up to five times per hour! Rather, the text teaches that there is no limit to the number of visits that a person can make to another in need. One does not really fulfill the *mitzvah* of *bikkur cholim* by paying a single visit to one person who is ill.

Talmud Nedarim 39b includes the intriguing statement that "he who visits a sick person takes away one sixtieth of his illness." A simpleton might assume from this that sixty visitors could cure a *choleh*, but R. Abba bar R. Chanina was no simpleton. Illness is not quantifiable, but even if it were, we can assume that R. Abba bar R. Chanina knew basic math.

His statement is a variation of Zeno's paradox, the mathematical concept that if one divides an object over and over, one never reaches its end. If one visitor were to alleviate one-sixtieth of a 60-part illness, the patient would be left with a 59-part illness. A second visitor could alleviate one sixtieth of the remaining 59-part illness, leaving the *choleh* with a 59-.983- part illness. Appendix D charts the mathematics of R. Abba bar R. Chanina's theory, demonstrating that regardless of the number of visitors, the *choleh* will always retain some degree of infirmity.

R. Abba bar R. Chanina's statement captures the rabbinic perspective on the role of *bikkur cholim* in the cure of illness. The average visitor cannot cure a sick person. Even sixty visitors cannot restore a sick person to perfect health. If one could quantify illness, however, a visit from a member of the community could help a sick person feel a little better than he would otherwise feel. The purpose of visiting the sick was not to cure the person, but to provide a small amount of comfort, relief, and healing.

Occasionally, a sick person does recover following a visit. In Talmud Nedarim 40a, we learn of such a case. The case is an admonishment of people who do not visit the sick. It illustrates the principle that even a great person must visit a humble one, showing Rabbi Akiva himself sweeping the floor of a sick man. The sick man recovers as a result of Akiva's caring, whereby Akiva criticizes those who do not visit the sick, equating them with "shedders of blood."

Talmud Berachot 5b is the least straightforward of the aggadot on *bikkur cholim*. It tells the story of Rabbi Yochanan's visit to Rabbi Eliezer during a time of illness. The passage's intent is unclear. It does not seem to relate to any specific principle or biblical text, nor does it seem to have a moral. The passage itself has textual difficulties. It says, "He uncovered his arm and light fell," but does not indicate whether Yochanan uncovered his own arm or that of Rabbi Eliezer. The significance of light falling is unclear.

Rabbi Yochanan sees Rabbi Eliezer crying and tries to guess why. Rabbi Eliezer finally explains why he is crying, and the two men cry together. Rabbi Yochanan asks whether Rabbi Eliezer's sufferings are dear to him, and Eliezer responds that they are not. Then Yochanan asks for Eliezer's hand and raises Rabbi Eliezer or is raised by him.

The passage is a mass of strange circumstances, misplaced modifiers, and detached pronouns. Nevertheless, Berachot 5b is one of the more well known aggadot regarding *bikkur cholim*. A Bikkur Cholim Training Manuel and Give me your Hand, two widely distributed manuals on the modern practice of *bikkur cholim*, use Berachot 5b as a central text. In later chapters, we will examine the passage in greater depth, to discover why this is so. At this point, however, I would like to shift our attention away from the visitor and toward the infirm, himself or herself.

Chapter Three

Letting the Texts Speak to Us

Part B: The *Choleh*

By studying the literature of the sages, one can easily distill rabbinic Jewish beliefs about the role and responsibilities of a *mevaker(et) cholim*, a visitor to the ill. On the other hand, rabbinic literature presents ambiguous and often contradictory attitudes toward the *choleh*, the one who is ill. As Chapter Two demonstrated, the rabbis perceived of *bikkur cholim* as a Godly action and as a significant obligation of every Jew.

The wealthy, the impoverished, the educated and the simple were equally bound by the commandment to visit the ill.¹ Regardless of the cause of a person's illness, every person was responsible for visiting the afflicted. The doctor might visit in order to provide medical counsel.² Others might visit to offer prayer, companionship,³ help with final confessions,⁴ or assistance with household chores.⁵

Certain members of the community failed to live up to the standard of visiting the sick on a regular basis. Talmud Nedarim 40b tells that when R.

¹ Talmud Nedarim 39b.

² Vayikra Rabbah 13.

³ Talmud Berachot 5b.

⁴ Kohelet Rabbah 7:8.

⁵ In Talmud Nedarim 40a, Hillel sweeps the floor of his sick disciple, whereupon the disciple recovers from his illness. His sweeping of the floor is certainly an act of compassion, though it may have its roots in superstition or in beliefs about medical hygiene. Halachic materials, including The Laws of Visiting the Sick in Joseph Caro's Shulchan Aruch, state that when visiting the sick, one must "inquire whether it is necessary to sweep or sprinkle the floor before him or anything similar to this" (See Appendix E, #9).

Helbo fell ill, no one came to visit him. Despite the failure of some to visit the ill, *bikkur cholim* remained a religious imperative and a societal ideal. One who did not engage in *bikkur cholim* risked community censure and Divine retribution.

Halachic materials on *bikkur cholim* provide clear protocol regarding the proper behavior of a visitor. The aggadic materials reflect that protocol. They lend anecdotal support to it, and help us to understand the ways in which the protocol translated into human experience.

Joseph Caro's *Shulchan Aruch*, a sixteenth century legal code, includes a section on the laws of visiting the sick. I have translated those laws in Appendix D. The laws demonstrate that writers of *halacha* faced dilemmas with respect to establishing clear guidelines for the *mevaker(et) cholim*. The rabbis held majority and minority opinions on difficult questions, including whether one should visit one's enemies when they are ill.⁶

Despite the debate over certain issues, the rabbis' thoughts concerning the *mevaker(et) cholim* are clear and unambiguous:

- 1) Both God and humanity have the capacity to act as *mevaker(et) cholim*.
- 2) Visiting the sick is a praiseworthy endeavor.
- 3) The *mevaker(et) cholim* should treat the *choleh* with compassion, showing respect for the spiritual and physical state of the *choleh*, and allowing the *choleh* to maintain a sense of modesty.
- 4) The *mevaker(et) cholim* should provide the *choleh* with proper, medical care. If the *choleh* is likely to live, the *mevaker(et)* must administer

⁶ Caro, Joseph. Shulchan Aruch. Laws of Visiting the Sick, #2. Sixteenth century.

the appropriate remedies. If the *choleh* is likely to die, then the *mevaker(et)* must provide the *choleh* with physical comfort.

5) The *mevaker(et) cholim* should pray for and with the *choleh*. S/he should assist the *choleh* in settling financial affairs, and in making peace with God.

Rabbinic literature presents a more complicated view of the *choleh*. When reading characterizations of the *choleh* in rabbinic literature, we find a figure fraught with paradox. Rabbinic portrayals of the *choleh* reveal inconsistent and often contradictory understandings of illness and of the persons afflicted with it.

Some of the confusion regarding rabbinic attitudes toward the *choleh* derives from the interdependency of physical and spiritual maladies in the rabbinic mind. *Choleh*, for the rabbis, sometimes refers to a person who exhibits physical symptoms of disease. Sometimes, *choleh* refers to a person who has fallen away from the community through sin.

Physical and spiritual maladies are not mutually exclusive. A person's physical illness might be punishment for sin. The experience of physical illness effects one's ability to perform mitzvot and to maintain faith in God. Physical illness and near death experience can bring one closer to God. In some cases, God⁸ afflicts the truly righteous as a test of faith.

We can create a false construct, placing the physically infirm and the spiritually downtrodden into separate categories, but in the rabbinic mind, the physical and the spiritual are closely related. Sometimes their relationship is causal, sometimes correlational. Often the two are indistinguishable.

There are cases in which the rabbis do distinguish between a *choleh* whose physical ailments are a punishment for sin and those who have contracted

illness through physical contagion. In both cases, the *choleh* receives the same treatment. Tosafot at Baba Kamma 5a, *shenitnah*, exemplifies rabbinic recognition of the distinction, and disregard for it:

You might think that the words "heal, he shall heal" (Exodus 21:18-19) apply only in the case of humanly contracted illnesses, but not in the case of illnesses that are sent by Heaven. When the physician heals it, it appears as if he contradicts a divine decree. Come and learn, for this is not so.

One passage in Rashi's commentary to Yechezkiel 34:11 suggests that *bikkur cholim* is a matter of visiting those Jews who have fallen away from proper, Jewish practice. *Bikkur cholim* in that case is a "checking up on" a person's religious observance, with the intent of restoring it to its proper standard. The root BKR is used here as a double entendre, meaning both "to visit" and "to check." In this case, rather than visiting an ill member of the community, one "examines" a person in order to assess that person's faith.

The rabbis hold two conflicting beliefs about the *choleh*. On the one hand, they believe that the *choleh* is especially far from God and in need of reconciliation with God. On the other hand, the rabbis see an intimacy between God and the physically infirm, which is not shared by people who are in good health.

The rabbis inherited the biblical view that illness comes from God, frequently as punishment for transgressions. Exodus 15:26 explicitly states that failure to obey God will result in disease:

If you will heed Adonai your God diligently, doing what is upright in God's sight, giving ear to God's commandments, and keeping God's laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I am Adonai who heals you.

The rabbis assume that God continues to use illness as a means of punishment. In the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 101a, Rabbi Yochanan comments upon Exodus 15:26. Rabbi Yochanan concludes that God does not

inflict disease upon the righteous, but only on the sinner. Despite using illness as chastisement, God mercifully heals the afflicted. The talmudic passage reads:

Rabbi Yochanan explains that the verse (Exodus 15:26) means, "If you hearken (to the voice of God), I will not bring diseases upon you. If you will not (hearken), then I will (bring disease). Even so, I am Adonai who heals you."

Not every case of illness is perceived by the rabbis as punishment. Abraham chooses to be circumcised, and is visited by God during his recovery from the surgery. As Ramban explains, God visited Abraham as a means of showing honor to him for keeping a commandment. Abraham's wounds elevate him in God's eyes. They do not diminish him.

Those who are injured in fulfillment of a commandment are not the only *cholim* that God elevates. Rashi to Bereshit 21:17 tells that the prayer of a sick person is better than the prayer of others, and it is accepted first. In Talmud Berachot 5b, Rabbi Chanina asks the ailing Rabbi Yochanan whether his sufferings are dear to him, as if illness somehow enobles a person. Caro's Shulchan Aruch indicates that the Shekhina hovers above the bedboard of a sick person, and it is therefore adviseable to face the *choleh* during prayer. There are aggadot about great sages who fall ill and die, yet those aggadot are not concerned with sin as a possible cause of the sage's illness.

Perhaps the elevation in esteem for the *choleh* derives from the belief that the *choleh* is closer to death than a person who is healthy. As one who may soon enter the world to come, the *choleh* was thought to be closer to God than the robust. It is difficult to ascertain the reason for the rabbi's paradoxical approach to the *choleh*. Suffice to say that regardless of whether a *choleh* is intimate with or alienated from God, the rabbis embrace him or her as a member of the community. They assume that even if the patient is being

punished by God s/he has not been abandoned by God, and should not be abandoned by other Jews.

Each *choleh* in the rabbinic literature faces illness differently. The aggadic materials that describe the behavior of various *cholim* tell us more about specific characters than about general rabbinic attitudes toward the sick. Abraham embodies the rabbinic model for hospitality. The rabbis emphasize throughout their commentaries that Abraham leaves his tent door open to all who might wish to enter. He welcomes the stranger without fail, offering food and water, and a bit of Torah.

When Abraham becomes the *choleh* that God visits in *Parashat Vayera*, he acts in ways which characterized his patriarchy. Just after his circumcision, he rushes out to greet wayfarers and make them his guests. He helps his guests find their way to Sodom. Bereshit Rabbah 49:4 shows how Abraham was able to outwit certain visitors in order that they come to acknowledge Adonai as God.

In the *Vayera* text, God may be the model visitor, but Abraham is not a typical *choleh*. The rabbis' comments to *Vayera* are lessons in how a Jew should act toward the stranger. Their message does not regard a prototypical *choleh*.

Similarly, Kohelet Rabbah 7:8 tells of a visit to the infamous heretic, Elisha ben Abuya. Rabbi Meir invites the heretic to repent. Elisha ben Abuya wonders whether God can ever accept his return. Rabbi Meir helps Elisha ben Abuya to understand that even a sinner who is very far from God can find forgiveness.

Elisha ben Abuya's deathbed conversion teaches the reader about repentance. Even a heretic as committed to heresy as Elisha ben Abuya can

return to God. The average sinner, therefore, should not be afraid that God will not accept his conversion.

In Talmud Nedarim 40b, Rabbi Akiva's ailing disciple becomes a passive recipient of Akiva's caring. Akiva cures the disciple through an act of *bikkur cholim*. The passage concerns Akiva, his sense of compassion, and his humility. It stresses the important role that a visitor can play in healing another. The passage does not, however, lend much insight into the *choleh*, himself.

Rabbi Eliezer's visit to Rabbi Yochanan in Talmud Berachot 5b, is another case in point. Rabbi Yochanan, who was famous for his beauty, goes to visit his sick friend. The passage illustrates Rabbi Yochanan's character.

Yochanan's beauty literally lights up the room. Yochanan, a great Palestinian sage who headed two different academies, however, shows little tact in talking with his sick friend. He chats about Eliezer's minimal scholarship, his lack of wealth, and his childlessness.

Eliezer, with tongue in cheek, points out that he cries because he knows that physical beauty is temporal. Eliezer, himself, will perish, as will Rabbi Yochanan and his physical beauty with him. The two men weep together over the inevitable loss of beauty.

Despite Yochanan's lack of tact, his visit still uplifts Rabbi Eliezer. From this we learn little about the *choleh*. We learn much about Rabbi Yochanan's strengths and limitations. We learn, too, that even an imperfect visitor can bring relief to the ill.

One might argue that the literature about the *mevaker(et) cholim* teaches more about individual visitors than about the protocol of visiting the sick. God's visit to Abraham could be understood as an illustration of God's

compassion, as opposed to a model of *bikkur cholim*.⁷ Rabbi Akiva's visit to the sick disciple in Talmud Nedarim 40b merely illustrates Akiva's own sense of duty.

The passages which tell about the visitor, however, usually indicate that they are prescriptive and not simply descriptive. *Bikkur Cholim* is included in the lists of *g'milut chassadim*. *G'milut chassadim* include the things that we do in emulation of God. The admonition, "Whoever does not visit the sick is like a shedder of blood. . ." follows the account of Akiva's visit to the sick disciple.⁸ These anecdotes about famous visitors are clearly used to illustrate rabbinic expectations of the visitor to the ill.

Furthermore, not every visitor in the aggadot is a known figure. With respect to the visitor, the texts often use terms which are inclusive of all. "One who visits a sick person takes away one sixtieth of his illness," Talmud Nedarim 39b states. "One can spring to his feet to visit the sick. . .", explains Midrash Tanchuma 12:12. Midrash Mishlei 27:18 indicates that visiting the ill brings eternal reward to any visitor.

Aggadot concerning visitors clearly point to prescriptive measures. When the texts include a visitor's identity, the visitor inevitably represents a figure whom the rabbis emulate and respect. Some of the aggadot include direct imperatives. When a visitor's identity is not revealed, the text implies that all visitors act in fulfillment of a mitzvah and are rewarded accordingly.

This is not the case with respect to aggadot concerning the *choleh*. In conveying the actions of a well-known *choleh*, the texts point to descriptive measures. Aggadot tell that Abraham extended hospitality during his

⁷ Rashi to Bereshit 18:1-2.

⁸ Talmud Nedarim 40a.

recovery from circumcision. The rabbis viewed Abraham as exceptional. The midrash does not convey the message that the typical *choleh* is expected to feed and entertain those who inquire after his well-being.

The aggadot tend not to include instructions for the *choleh*. The rabbis did have certain expectations of a *choleh*, but the aggadot emphasize the role of the visitor in helping the *choleh* to do what is expected. At times, it seems as though the *choleh* is not under obligation to do certain things, but the visitor is obligated to make sure that the *choleh* performs certain actions.

The crucial responsibilities of every *choleh* include prayer and confession. Like all people, the *choleh* is bound by halachot pertaining to care for health, and s/he is not exempt from commandments which s/he can perform without further endangering his/her health. Some responsibilities of the *choleh* vary based on whether the *choleh* is likely to die or recover and based on whether the illness is primarily physical or spiritual in nature.

With respect to the obligation of the sick to pray, we recall Rashi to Bereshit 21:17, which explains that the prayer of the sick person is better than that which others pray for him, and it is accepted first. Many prayers to be recited by the ill were written during the rabbinic era.⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 60a, includes a discussion regarding what prayer should be said by a patient about to have a phlebotomy. I have excerpted this particular example of prayers intended for patient use, because it is contested by Abbaye based on the Exodus 15:19 passage mentioned earlier in this thesis:¹⁰

⁹ Odell, Wesley, Toward a Recovery of Prayer: A Reform Response to Healing. Rabbinic Thesis Completed in Partial Fulfillment for Ordination from HUC-JIR. Dr. Mark Washofsky, referee, 1994.

¹⁰ Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 101a.

Rav Ach said that one who is going in for a phlebotomy should recite the following blessing, "May it be Your will, Adonai, my God, that this operation may be a cure for me, and may You heal me, for You are a faithful, healing God, and your healing is sure, for people have no power to cure, but act as if they do." Abbaye said a person should not speak thus, for Rabbi Ishmael has taught, "Heal he shall heal" (Ex. 15:19), from this verse we learn that the Torah places it within the providence of physicians to heal.

All Jews are obligated to pray, but the *choleh*, in particular, has a special responsibility to plead on his own behalf. Similarly, all Jews are commanded to repent for sins and transgressions. The *choleh* performs acts of repentance out of a greater sense of urgency. If the illness is a punishment for sin, then repentance could assuage physical symptoms. Should a person die of his malady, it is preferable that s/he leave this world in a state of faith and repentance, following *viddui*¹¹ and with God's name on the lips.

Jewish teachings suggest that care for the body is of utmost importance. The *choleh* has a particular interest in care of the body. S/he is obligated to apply whatever remedies might promote his/her well-being. S/he cannot be denied proper medical care and is duty bound to pursue medical means of healing. Hilchot Deot 3:3 and 4:23 in Maimonides Mishneh Torah are dedicated to the subject of proper care for one's health:

A person should see to it that the body is kept healthy and strong, in order that they may be upright and know God. For it is impossible to understand and comprehend the wisdom (of Torah) when one is hungry or ailing or if one's limbs ache. . . . Since, when the body is healthy and sound, one walks in the way of God, it being impossible to understand or know anything of the knowledge of the Creator when one is sick. It is obligatory upon people to avoid things that are detrimental to the body and acclimate themselves to things that heal and fortify it.

¹¹ *Viddui*- the final confession that one recites before death. Talmud explains that it is better to make a final confession and live than to die without having made one's final confession.

A person who is ill need not be concerned with how to pay for proper medical care, for Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 336:3 tells that "He who has medicine, and his sick neighbor requires it, is forbidden to raise their price above the proper level." Babylonian Talmud, Taannit 21b includes this aggadah concerning the value of providing medical attention to the poor:

Abba the Phlebotomist had a box placed outside his office where his fees were to be deposited. Whoever had money put it in, but those who had none could enter without embarrassment. When he saw a person who was unable to pay, he would offer him some money, saying to him, "Go strengthen yourself."

A person who is poor and ill is obligated to seek out proper medical care, whether or not s/he can afford it. The physician need not worry that his income would suffer. The society viewed life and health as a religious concern. A physician who did not act in the best interest of the *choleh* would be in violation of God's commands. As a deterrent to the wealthy, who could afford to compensate their physicians, Baba Kamma 85a admonishes, "A doctor who heals for nothing is worth nothing." This delightful "you-get-what-you-pay-for" attitude helped to assure that the physician's practice did not suffer due to his accomodation of the poor.

The rabbis distinguished between *cholim* who were likely to die, and those for whom recovery seemed likely. Halachic materials ascribe distinct, legal categories to different *cholim*, based on whether or not death is imminent. When the rabbis believe that a person has 72 hours left to live, that person becomes a *goses(et)*.

A *goses(et)* is a *choleh* who will die in three days. Rabbinic attitudes toward the *goses(et)* differ from the attitude toward other *cholim*. *Cholim* are entitled to medical care. Every effort must be made to restore that person to good health. One prays that the person be healed in body and spirit and

provides the person with medical treatments. Once a *choleh* qualifies as a *goses(et)*, however, one may not place impediments in the way of death.

The twelfth century work, Sefer Hasidim, notes that if the sound of chopping wood inhibits the onset of inevitable death, we must stop the woodchopper's chopping. A talmudic tale from Tractate Ketubot 104a illustrates the impact of imminent death on the practice of *bikkur cholim*:

On the day when Rabbi Judah died, the Rabbis decreed a public fast and prayed for heavenly mercy. They announced that whoever said that the master was dead would be stabbed with a sword.

The master's handmaid ascended the roof and prayed, "The immortals want my master to join them, but the mortals want my master to remain with them. May it be God's will that the mortals overpower the immortals."

When she saw how often he resorted to the privy, painfully removing his tefillin and putting them on again, she prayed, "May it be God's will that the immortals overpower the mortals." As the Rabbis continued their prayers for heavenly mercy, she took a jar and threw it from the roof to the ground. At that moment, they stopped praying and the soul of Rabbi (Judah) departed to its eternal rest.

The passage concerning Rabbi Judah's handmaiden has application to questions about termination of life. Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 339 provides an in depth discussion of the principle of removing impediments to death. With respect to our discussion of *bikkur cholim*, however, suffice it to say that rabbinic notions about the *choleh* depended largely upon the *choleh's* proximity to death.

The rabbis were more concerned with the behavior of the *mevaker(et) cholim* than with the behavior of the *choleh*, himself or herself. As a *mitzvah* that a person can perform of his or her volition, it was reasonable to explicate specific guidelines for the *mevakeret cholim*. On the other hand, there is a diversity amongst *cholim*, and the rabbis recognized that diversity, by establishing less strict guidelines for their behavior.

Illness is a universal phenomenon. The *cholim* of the rabbinic era included the pious and the heretical, scholars and simple laborers, the wealthy and the impoverished. Some *cholim* were close to God. Others were in need of repentance and reconciliation with God. Some *cholim* contracted their illnesses through human contact; others through divine retribution. Some *cholim* were in need of simple remedies; others were ready for death.

In rabbinic literature, all manner of *cholim* are mentioned. Their stories are told with a sense of compassion for their predicaments. The responsibilities of *cholim* are limited, but the community's responsibilities to them are great. All *cholim*, in the rabbinic mind, were worthy of communal respect and support. Regardless of the *choleh's* prior actions, status, or prognosis, the *choleh* was assured the support of others. Despite the rabbis' diverse depictions of *cholim*, their prescribed response was one of great caring.

The literature of the sages includes compelling aggadot concerning *bikkur cholim*. The aggadot give us insight into rabbinic conceptions of the ill and those who visit them. A question remains, however, regarding the degree to which these aggadot can contribute to our current ideas and ideals about care for the sick. In Chapter Four, we will consider whether non-halachic materials are appropriate resources for current practice. We will also assess the aggadic materials on *bikkur cholim* for their relevance to the modern *choleh* and/or *mevaker(et) cholim*.

Chapter Four

Talking Back to the Texts

The Use of Aggadah as a Resource for *Bikkur Cholim*

Through legal codes, scholars distilled instructions for proper behavior. The rules illustrated through the aggadot were defined, while the aggadot themselves were removed. *Shulchan Aruch*, the classic legal code, excluded the actual aggadot from its presentation of Jewish law. Subsequent generations of Jews tended to overlook aggadot when making decisions concerning Jewish practice. Scholars of Jewish law relegated aggadot to a status secondary to halacha.

Aggadic materials served numerous purposes for the rabbis, including that of practical guide. I do not believe that aggadic materials were meant to be excluded from halachic decision-making. Our study of the aggadot on *bikkur cholim* shows that the rabbis valued aggadot as descriptive, instructive, and prescriptive tools.

Talmud Nedarim 40b, for example, describes Rabbi Akiva as a humble and compassionate person. The narrative about Akiva's visit to the sick disciple's house may recount an actual event, but probably not. In either case, it describes the qualities of a famous sage.

The aggada acts in an instructive manner. Akiva goes forth and teaches, "Whoever does not visit the sick is like a shedder of blood." The aggada teaches that it is a positive command to visit the sick, but if one fails to visit the sick, one transgresses a negative command as well. One who fails to visit the sick is like a murderer, while one who fulfills the command to visit the sick is blessed with honor.

Finally, the aggada is prescriptive. The narrative appears in a section of Talmud that pertains to matters of *bikkur cholim*. Akiva's sweeping of the floor and his willingness to visit a person of lesser stature show the reader what he is expected to do. The Talmud prescribes the type of visitation exemplified by Akiva in this aggada.

In the rabbinic period, aggadot captured Jewish practice in a way that encompassed the vastness of the human experience. In the case of *bikkur cholim*, a system of law would have to be extremely extensive if it were to adequately address the diversity of human experience of illness. Every law becomes a generalization, in that certain cases would seem an exception to it. Each case contains a story. By emphasizing only the legal verdict in a case, without paying heed to the story contained therein, we lose valuable resources for understanding Jewish practice.

Halacha emphasizes specific practices in concrete situations. While people who visit the sick sometimes face concrete situations requiring urgent and decisive action, this is not always the case. For example, one might have to decide whether or not to remove a feeding-tube, or administer a medication whose side effects seem as dramatic as the symptoms they are meant to cure.

For the most part, however, visitation to the ill involves the encounter between two persons who exist on different points of the continuum between health and illness. Each person involved in that encounter brings a personal experience of life, death, and illness. Each person brings to the encounter a different life story and personal theology. Through story-telling, one can begin to convey the real and lived experience of both the patient and the visitor.

Through aggadot, we develop a sensitivity to the complexity of the rabbinic experience, as Jews of the rabbinic period interacted with halacha. While the

laws define boundaries and consequences, the midrashim describe, instruct, and prescribe for us the realities for which boundaries do not apply and consequences are difficult to predict. In Jewish literature, law and lore work hand in hand, forming a backdrop for entering the rabbinic world and mindset.

The social experience of a progressive Jew living in the United States in the 1990's is quite different from the experience of the small, insular communities in which Jewish law developed. For some, it is difficult to make any but the most obtuse and abstract analogies between our lives and the lives of the gaonim and amoraim. Laws enacted during the rabbinic period may seem irrelevant to our experience as progressive Jews. The desire to share tales of illness, however, remains a universal if not archetypal need.

As I probe aggadic materials for their practical application to *bikkur cholim* in the modern era, two recent works guide my study:

- 1) "Rabbi Judah's Handmaid", by William Cutter.¹
- 2) Pastoral Care and the Jewish Tradition, by Robert L. Katz.²

An overview of these two works, and an explanation of their relevance to the practical application of *aggadot*, will elucidate the techniques used to understand non-legal materials as resources for *bikkur cholim*.

"Rabbi Judah's Handmaid" broaches the subject of ethical decision-making when caring for a person in a state of dying. Technological tools such as respirators have changed the kinds of decisions about the *goses(et)* that we make. Dr. Cutter examines the tale of Rabbi Judah's Handmaid, as recorded in Talmud Ketubot 104a, for its application to these kinds of decisions.

¹ Cutter, William. "Rabbi Judah's Handmaid." n.p., n.d.

² Katz, Robert L. Pastoral Care and the Jewish Tradition. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.

While the tale of Rabbi Judah's Handmaid has served as a source for understanding a central principle of care for the *goses(et)*, Dr. Cutter offers a new perspective on the use of *aggada* as a tool for ethical decision-making. Dr. Cutter posits a distinction between "halachic formalism" and "narrative thinking."

"Halachic formalism" draws heavily on the use of figures of speech, measurement, and analogy, in order to come as close as possible to showing what cannot be captured by a graphic picture. One has a rule and a specific circumstance. One tries to determine whether the specific circumstance is the same as or different from the circumstance which the original maker of the rule had in mind. In this instance a "story" might be used to modify or clarify or disagree with the general rule.

On the other hand, "narrative thinking" utilizes the story as an independent form of speech. In that way, the story gives a construction of reality, so that new meanings can develop. In "narrative thinking," a partnership exists between narrator and listener (or reader). Both the language of the story and the peculiar situation of the auditor create different constructions to the same story. The story, itself, develops a multiplicity of meanings based on the reality brought to the story by a specific reader.

The potential for multiple constructs of the same narrative does not mean that a given passage "has no particular meaning" or "could mean anything." There can be no integrity to the use of rabbinic texts as mere "Rorschach tests" of a listener's unconscious whims. Nevertheless, one can acknowledge that each story has different meanings for different listeners, or different meanings for the same listener at different times in his or her life.

Rabbi Cutter approaches the tale of Rabbi Judah's Handmaiden with an openness to a multiplicity of meanings. He presents three readings of the

story, from the perspective of three listeners: a psychologist, a literary theorist, and a lawyer. In each case, his primary question is that of treatment of the *goses(et)*.

"Narrative thinking" is useful to questions of visiting the sick. The *aggadot* on *bikkur cholim* which I have selected can be read independently of specific rules or circumstances. They do lend themselves to a multiplicity of meanings. In discussing the protocol of visiting the sick, our *aggadot* will be read through the lenses of patient, hospital chaplain, and student of midrash.

In Pastoral Care and the Jewish Tradition, Robert Katz examines *aggadot* pertaining to rabbinical counseling. Dr. Katz applies a clinical social work perspective to those *aggadot*, in order to gain insight into appropriate methods of pastoral counselling. For Dr. Katz, empathy becomes the crucial key to effective communication and counselling.

The rabbinic texts which Dr. Katz excerpts show sages engaged in rabbinic counselling. Some of the sages conduct their "counselling sessions" in ways that are consistent with the guidelines of clinical social work. Some of the sages' methods of counselling are less than impressive by current standards of clinical social work.

Katz considers all of the *aggadot* useful, whether as a model for proper practice or as a case study for a counselling session gone awry. His book emphasizes the development of pastoral care skills, using *aggadot* as an instructive resource. The *aggadot* are a means to the end of gaining understanding of counselling others through personal or theological crisis.

Like Katz, I will look at *aggadot* as a student of effective pastoral counselling. My study, of course, is specific to counselling which takes place during times of illness. Some of the *aggadot* which I have excerpted will be useful as models for proper practice. Others are better suited to helping the

mevaker(et) cholim learn what not to do and how to avoid certain pitfalls of counselling.

A concept introduced in Chapter Two is that of "talking back to the text." Following exegesis of a passage, it becomes appropriate to reread the text for purposes of self understanding. Rereading a text in this manner, or "talking back to the text" is the process that will occupy the remainder of this chapter. Applying the approaches favored by Cutter and Katz, I will examine individual *aggadot* on *bikkur cholim* with an eye toward their utility to the modern *choleh* or *mevaker(et) cholim*.

The original intentions of Rashi to Bereshit 18:1-2, are to explain inconsistencies in the biblical text, to show God as a merciful judge who performs acts of *gemilut chassadim*, and to characterize Abraham as a model of hospitality to the stranger. For a modern *choleh* or *mevaker(et) cholim*, the passage serves additional purposes. Some of those purposes derive from the passage's original intent, some take the passage out of its original context.

If we view God as a model *mevaker cholim*, we learn that visiting the sick is a merciful and just action. When Abraham rises to greet God, God insists that he sit. Both halacha and suggested contemporary practice would approve of God's standing and insisting that Abraham sit.

Joseph Caro's third law of visiting the sick instructs, "One who visits the sick may neither sit upon a bed nor upon a chair, nor upon a stool, but must wrap himself and sit in front of him. . . . This applies when the sick person lies on the ground. If the sick person is on the bed, it is permissible to sit on a chair or on a stool."

Give Me Your Hand, a modern practical guide for visiting the sick, suggests: "DO position yourself so that the patient can see you without strain. DON'T sit on the bed without the patient's permission."³

From a practical perspective, we learn that it is the visitor's responsibility to position himself or herself in a way that the patient will be comfortable. Whereas one would be expected to stand or bow out of respect for God, Abraham is permitted to sit during his recuperation. God stands in a position so that Abraham can see him, and insists that Abraham not try to get up.

God tries to be of assistance to Abraham, by making the sun shine. God intended to save Abraham from the trouble of unwanted guests. When Abraham appears disappointed that he has no visitors, God sends the three men. In this way, God is a model for the model *mevaker(et) choleh*, in that a visitor should try to be of tangible assistance to the patient.⁴

One finds, however, that different patients have different needs. A visitor needs to be sensitive to the fact that what is done with the best of intentions may not be helpful. For example, one goes to visit with the intention of providing the *choleh* with some company. Upon speaking with the *choleh*, however, one might learn that what he really wants is some peace, quiet, and privacy. Another *choleh* might be delighted to have someone to talk to.

God tried to keep visitors away from Abraham, only to discover that Abraham wanted visitors. Like a model *mevaker(et) cholim*, God was sensitive to Abraham's needs as a unique individual. God was willing to change his plan in order to accommodate the *choleh*.

³ Yurow, Jane. Give Me Your Hand. Washington, D.C.: Adas Israel Congregation, 1988.

⁴ Ibid.

The three men, God's messengers, also show sensitivity to the needs of their *choleh*, by not approaching Abraham when he was changing his bandages. Illness puts one in a state of vulnerability. While in this vulnerable condition, patients can feel especially uncomfortable and exposed due to hospital gowns that are open in the back or invasive, medical examinations. Medical professionals and well-meaning visitors should heed the example set by the angels in Rashi's commentary, showing sensitivity to a patient's sense of modesty.

Rashi to Bereshit 18:1-2 can be instructive to the *choleh* as well. During a time of crisis, it can seem as though God is distant. Viewing kindhearted visitors as agents of God can alleviate some of that sense of abandonment. Abraham maintained his identity as a hospitable person, even during a period of illness. He continued to maintain those activities that brought joy to him, including welcoming the stranger.

Surely a *choleh* can not be expected to entertain and feed visitors, but most *cholim* do benefit from engaging in activities that bring them a sense of confidence and competence. A challenge of working with children who suffer from chronic illness is that the children can develop an identity which is based solely on their disease.⁵ Adults, too, can become despondent in the face of an illness that jeopardizes their ability to be productive.

Just as Abraham wished to provide hospitality to strangers even during his recovery from circumcision, so, too, does the *choleh* benefit from engaging in activities not directly related to illness. Due to illness, the *choleh* cannot control every aspect of his activities or schedule. Failure to pursue activities

⁵ Rev. John Baker, chaplain intern in Pediatrics, UCLA Medical Center. Public lecture, February 1995.

or interests that are in the realm of control can lead the physically ill to become clinically depressed.⁶

Rashi to Bereshit 21:17 adds credence to the discussion of God's sense of intimacy with the *choleh*, and to the importance to the *choleh* of doing for himself that which he is capable of doing. The text indicates that the prayer of the sick person is better than that which others pray for him, and it is accepted first. This applies to the modern *mevaker(et) cholim*, in that it is tempting for the *mevaker(et)* to act on behalf of a patient. In the case of prayer, it is in the patient's best interest to maintain a pre-existing prayer routine, or to consider prayer as a tool for healing. By helping *cholim* to pray for themselves, the *mevaker(et)* lends a measure of self-sufficiency to *cholim*, and provides them with an opportunity for growth in spirit.

Larry Dossey, M.D. published a book on the relationship between prayer and healing.⁷ Dr. Dossey began his career as a physician who believed that prayer was a superstitious practice that had no medical benefits. After practicing medicine for many years, he was stunned to discover scientific evidence of the healing power of prayer. Dossey devoted ten years of research to the relationship of prayer and healing, and discovered that while prayer does not take the place of good medicine, it does complement good medicine.

Dr. Dossey's research indicates that even in modern times, there is evidence that God hears the prayers of the sick person. While patients are not cured through prayer alone, prayer is one component of healing. Prayer is one of the many aspects of treatment for which a patient can take responsibility.

⁶ Katz, Nina Dubler. Yad L'Yad: A Training Manual for Bikur Cholim Volunteers. New York: CCBC Press, 1992.

⁷ Dossey, Larry. Healing Words. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

Rashi to Yechezkiel 34:11 expounds upon the double-meaning of the Hebrew root BKR. *Bikkur* means both "to examine" and "to visit." The modern *mevaker(et) cholim* has a dual responsibility to those s/he visits. On the one hand, the *mevaker(et)* does visit *cholim* in fulfillment of a commandment. On the other hand, the *mevaker(et)* examines *cholim* for signs of progress, depression, or neglect.

In modern times, *cholim* must seek out their physicians. If a *choleh* is physically or emotionally unable to tell a physician of a new symptom, then the symptom goes untreated. A *mevaker(et)* can and should be aware of changes in the condition of a *choleh*. When new symptoms emerge, the *mevaker(et)* can help *cholim* to get the care that they need.

A *mevaker(et)* may notice that a particular *choleh* needs additional help with feeding or with taking prescribed medications. S/he may notice that a patient has become suicidal or even demented. An alert visitor can check for signs of difficulty that might go unnoticed by others.

The *choleh* also experiences the dual role of one who is both visited and examined. The *choleh* is visited by friends, family, and health care providers. His bodily functions, physical condition, and vital signs are examined by many.

One of the only benefits of being ill is the opportunity for examination of the self. When confined to a sickbed, one has ample time to ponder great questions. When faced with the prospect of death or disability, one cannot help but rethink one's priorities and reflect upon one's past deeds. The patient becomes an examined examiner, visited during a time of distress. For the religious person, it is important to recognize that God is a key figure in both the visitation and the examination.

While some might feel concerned that their illness is the result of moral failings, the Yechezkiel passage shows God seeking out sick people and visiting them. The search for the sheep may indicate that God passes moral judgement, but in the case of the sick person, God comes for the purpose of comfort. God is a judge, but a merciful judge, who does not abandon the ill, but rather attends to them as a shepherd tends to his flock.

Ramban to Bereshit 18:1-2 builds upon Rashi's commentary to the same passage. Ramban's additions reflect the perspective that God's visit to Abraham was strictly for the purpose of showing respect to the infirm. God did not come to give Abraham instructions to prophesy.

Ramban's comments are useful to the *mevaker(et) cholim* in that they act as a reminder that a visit to the ill is meant to be helpful to the one who is visited. One should not visit the ill with an ulterior motive. Just as God did not visit for the sake of "some utterance," a *mevaker(et) cholim* ought not use the *choleh* as a captive audience for listening to his/her own problems. S/he should not use the visit as a means for convincing the *choleh* to will possessions to the visitor, or ask the *choleh* for special favors. The visit is meant as a sign of respect to the *choleh*.

Bereshit Rabbah 8:13 compiles the prooftexts for *gemilut chasadim*. The passage lists each of the actions that humans must perform in imitation of God. Bereshit 18:1 is used as the prooftext for visiting the sick.

The use of Bereshit 18:1 in this context demonstrates that God's visit to Abraham at the Terebinths of Mamre does not constitute an isolated description of an event that occurred between Abraham and God. Rather, God routinely performs acts of *bikkur cholim*. Bereshit Rabbah is written in the present tense, "He visits the sick."

Through Bereshit Rabbah, the *mevaker(et)* learns that God models *bikkur cholim*. Bereshit 18:1 is not to be read as descriptive. It is instructive and prescriptive. Bereshit Rabbah teaches the *choleh* that God did not visit Abraham because Abraham was special, but because God visits the sick on a continual basis. God accompanies each person on the path of life, during times of illness, times of rejoicing, and times of death. The *choleh* can count on God's presence, whether or not s/he can sense God's presence in the moment.

Bereshit Rabbah 49:4 teaches that *tzedakkah* precedes *mishpat*, in the biblical passage and in life. For *bikkur cholim*, one could say that this is also the case. One should do what is righteous and right before concerning oneself with judgement or justice. The problem of theodicy notwithstanding, bad things do happen to bad people, sometimes. In a judgemental way, it can be tempting to refrain from visiting someone whom we presume to be deserving of retribution.

In those cases, however, it is right to visit. If one must exact justice, then it should come after extending kindness and mercy to the person. *Tzeddakah* should precede *mishpat* with respect to *bikkur cholim* in the modern context.

An example of this would be that of the criminal who has been shot during a robbery or a gang war. Even the most righteous and charitable person might wish to let that criminal lie alone in pain. By engaging in *bikkur cholim*, however, one can potentially lead the *choleh* to understand that there are alternatives to violence and crime. One can build trust with the *choleh*, and encourage the *choleh* to see that the shooting can become a turning point toward leading a more productive life.

That is not to say that through kindness alone one can make another person change. Indeed, *mishpat* frequently requires the visitor to be shrewd or even harsh. In Bereshit Rabbah 49:4, Abraham outsmarts his guests after

extending *tzedakkah* to them. Similarly, when visiting an ailing criminal, one must not accept as reality the world view espoused by the criminal. Rather, one must use cunning to help the criminal admit to his or her needs to make amends.

Vayikra Rabbah 13:11 contains an aggadah specific to visits between doctor and patient. The aggadah points to the ethical decisions faced by doctors in every generation. Doctors must consider which treatments to recommend to a patient. This aggadah provides a guideline for making certain types of treatment decisions.

Prognosis can influence a doctor's recommendations for treatment. In Vayikra Rabbah 13:11, the doctor is faced with a decision concerning the best diets for two patients. In the case of the patient whose death is imminent, the physician favors what we call "palliative care." The dying patient may eat as he pleases, without concern for a food's curative effects. The patient who will live, however, must sustain his or her own life through proper diet.

For the modern *choleh*, Vayikra Rabbah 13:11 contains helpful insights into illness. Patients sometimes resent undergoing painful or inconvenient treatments. A diabetic, for example, might resent his or her doctor for recommending a certain diet. Many people resent being told what to do. Some resent having to change lifestyle or habits.

A person who feels resentment over treatment for a medical condition might refer to Vayikra Rabbah 13:11. The passage serves as a reminder that treatment implies a positive prognosis. One can take comfort after being told to take bitter medicine. That prescription is better than being told that there is nothing more that can be done to improve a medical condition. Treatment paves the road to life. Instructions to do as one pleases might imply that death is imminent.

Bamidbar Rabbah 18:12 provides rabbinic justification for a puzzling statement by Moses in Parashat Korach. The midrash includes a parable about a king whose daughter is about to be married. In the parable, a person appointed to oversee the validity of the marriage contract of the king's daughter hears a wedding guest deny the daughter's virginity. The person appointed to oversee the validity of the marriage contract says that if the king does not kill the guest, he will proclaim the guest's accusation to be true.

In the parable, the king represents God. The one appointed over the daughter's marriage interests refers to Moses. Moses proclaims that if God does not kill Korach for his rebellion against God, then Moses will proclaim Korach to be a bearer of truth. Moses threatens to abandon God, just as the one appointed to look after the daughter's marriage interests threatened to abandon the king.

The biblical passage refers to death, dying, and visitation. Moses makes clear that Korach should not die of natural causes. His death should demonstrate the horrible consequences of rebellion.

This particular aggadah does not seem particularly relevant to *bikkur cholim* in modern times. The aggadah is about Moses' stance on Korach's rebellion. While the text mentions visitation of the sick, it does not contain useful insights for the visitor or the ill. Despite its lack of utility as a source for understanding modern *bikkur cholim*, the text still qualifies for this study, based on its direct mention of visiting the sick.

Kohelet Rabbah 7:8 is useful to the discussion of *bikkur cholim* in the modern era. From the perspective of a *mevaker(et) cholim*, we learn that one should visit those who are disenfranchised from the community. One should not restrict one's visits to friends and family. Staff and members of congregations should not limit their visits to people who are already strong in

faith. One can assist a person in settling personal, financial, and religious affairs during a period of illness.

The *choleh* can find strength in this tale of Elisha b. Abuya's deathbed conversion. The *choleh* who examines his soul during a time of illness, may feel remorse or regret. The *choleh* can find consolation in the teaching that even the worst sinner can die in a mood of repentance. Rather than harbor regrets, the *choleh* can focus on making amends and returning to God.

Midrash Mishlei 27:18 places *bikkur cholim* in the category of actions for which a person "eats its fruits in this world," but "the reward comes to him in the world to come." Mishlei 27:18 states that "he who tends a fig tree will enjoy its fruit." R. Levi understands the tending of the fig tree to represent the study of Torah. According to R. Levi, "enjoyment of the fruit," the rewards of study, will take place in the world to come. The midrash associates Torah, "the tree of life," with the fig tree mentioned in Mishlei. It expounds upon the proverb accordingly.

The rabbis derive the practice of *bikkur cholim* from Torah. To them, the practice of *bikkur cholim* constitutes one of the "fruits" that come from tending to the study of the Torah, the tree of life. In visiting the sick, one can be said to be eating the fruit of the tree of life. In the world to come, one is rewarded for the action.

"Fruit" acts as an apt metaphor for *bikkur cholim*. Fruit is sweet, succulent, and nourishing. In likening *bikkur cholim* to the eating of fruit, the rabbis imply that the action usually brings a sense of pleasure. One might guess that *bikkur cholim* would cause a visitor to feel sad or bitter over the precariousness of life and health. Nina Dubler Katz's A Training Manual for

Bikur Cholim Volunteers⁸ offers suggestions for stress management in people who visit the sick on a regular basis.

In many instances, however, one feels "enriched and empowered" by visiting the sick.⁹ Listening to the concerns of another person, talking, laughing, or praying with a *choleh*, constitute rare moments. Such moments can seem closer to the core of human experience than most moments of one's daily life. A *mevaker(et) cholim* can emerge feeling stronger because of a meaningful moment with a *choleh*. The fruit that is *bikkur cholim*, then, can be enjoyed while upon earth.

The rabbis note, too, that the *mevaker(et) cholim* receives additional merit in the world to come. The *mevaker(et)* enjoys an internal sense of reward, and an external-eternal reward. In a single midrash, the rabbis provide two important motives for doing that which benefits the community. Modern leaders who wish to encourage others to visit the sick can learn from the rabbis' tactics. Just as the rabbis promised internal and external rewards, so too should volunteer recruiters for *bikkur cholim* committees consider the internal and external rewards that their volunteers will gain.

A Training Manual for Bikur Cholim Volunteers¹⁰ includes sample forms for volunteer coordinators concerned with motivating volunteers to perform the *mitzvah* of *bikkur cholim*. One form, entitled "Factors That Motivate Me," is meant to be completed by a perspective volunteer. The "factors" listed can be divided into two categories: internal and external motivators.

⁸ Katz, Nina Dublar. Yad L'Yad: A Training Manual for Bikur Cholim Volunteers. New York: CCBC Press, 1992.

⁹ Yurow, Jane. Give Me Your Hand. Washington, D.C.: Adas Israel Congregation. 1988.

¹⁰ Katz, Nina Dublar. Yad L'Yad: A Training Manual for Bikur Cholim Volunteers. New York: CCBC Press, 1985. pgs 96-98.

is meant to be completed by a perspective volunteer. The "factors" listed can be divided into two categories: internal and external motivators.

Internal motivators are reasons for wanting to do *bikkur cholim* which emanate from the self. Some examples of internal motivators from the "Factors that Motivate Me" form include: "I enjoy it; it is interesting;" "I feel trusted and respected;" or "I can learn and grow from it." External motivators are reasons for wanting to do *bikkur cholim* that emanate from outside of the self. Some examples of external motivators are: "It leads to recognition from others;" "I can move up in leadership in an organization;" or "the position will help to balance my professional resume."

A good volunteer coordinator needs to motivate volunteers internally and externally. The rabbis provided internal motivation by describing *bikkur cholim* as a fruit that one reaps from the study of Torah. Their external motivator was a promise of eternal rewards. In modern times, internal motivation can be provided by helping people to recognize and appreciate the positive feelings that come from fulfilling the *mitzvah of bikkur cholim*. External motivation can be provided through public recognition of volunteers and expressions of gratitude.

Midrash Tanchuma 12:12 distinguishes between body parts which God places under a person's control, and body parts which are not under a person's control. The midrash categorizes "feet" as a body part which is under a person's control. "One can spring to one's feet to visit the sick." of one's own volition.

When a person is ill, s/he may not experience the same sense of control over hands, mouth, and feet that s/he did when in good health. Although the midrash does not concern itself with that issue, the contrast is worth noting.

In truth, a *mevaker(et) cholim* can spring to his feet to visit the sick, but a *choleh* may not have the ability to do so.

The text naturally presumes a readership that is in healthy physical condition. A modern reader who engages in *bikkur cholim* might consider the contrast between the *mevaker(et)*, who has control over physical functioning, and the *choleh*, who does not. In reading this passage, the *mevaker(et)* can reflect upon the implications of not having control over physical functions that the text, itself, takes for granted.

The midrash suggests that all body parts are best used in service to God. It acknowledges that with some body parts, a person can choose to serve or to sin against God. The choice to serve God is the proper choice. A person is obligated to "spring to his feet" to do *bikkur cholim*, even if the person feels upset by the contrast between his state of health and the condition of the *choleh*.

Talmud Nedarim 39b begins by asking what is meant by the teaching, "There is no measure for visiting the sick." R. Joseph posits that the word "measure" in the teaching refers to the measure of reward. Abaye and Raba explain that "measure" refers to the guidelines that surround visiting the sick. In visiting the sick, one does not measure the status of the other person or the number of visits. One should visit without placing a limit on who one will visit or how much time one will spend with the *choleh*. R. Abba bar R. Chanina tries to assign a "measure" to the effects of visiting the sick. He suggests that one who visits a sick person takes away one sixtieth of his illness.

Talmud Nedarim 39b is rich in materials suitable to the modern *mevaker(et) cholim*. It reminds the *mevaker(et)* that like any *mitzvah*, the rewards outweigh the effort or inconvenience. It shows that illness is an equalizer

when it comes to social prestige. The great and the humble fall ill from time to time. The great and the humble must perform the *mitzvah*.

When a wealthy or learned person is in good health, he might care for a humble person financially, or in terms of sharing great teachings. In that case the humble person is dependent upon a great one for money or learning. The great person performs the *mitzvah*, and the humble one is the recipient of his actions.

During illness, these roles can be reversed. The wealthy person is now dependent upon the humble one for help and caring. This was the case in Abaye's day and in our own, for a person who is ill becomes dependent upon others. A person who normally cares for others, is cared for by others during times of illness.

When a humble person is ill, the great one should visit him. In modern times, too, a wealthy or learned person should feel compelled to pay attention to employees, students, or less fortunate neighbors who are ill. A modern, congregational rabbi is obligated to attend to an ailing Temple president with the same degree of enthusiasm that s/he attends to a less prestigious congregant.

Illness knows no social bounds. It can strike anyone. Given the egalitarian nature of illness, we should not place social boundaries around whom we will visit. God loves the great and the humble equally. When we imitate God through the performance of *g'millut chasadim*, we must serve both the great and the humble.

A modern reader can understand R. Abba bar Chanina's "one sixtieth" measure in many different ways. Most important, the statement implies that while no number of visits can cure a *choleh*, each visit has a slight healing effect. One should not neglect to reach out to a person who is ill thinking that

From the perspective of the *choleh*, it can be tempting to isolate oneself when one is ill. Some *cholim* refuse visitors for reasons of vanity. They do not want others to see them looking unwell. They do not want others to witness their vulnerability.

For the sake of health, the *choleh* would be wise to welcome visitors. The midrash insists that each visitor can relieve a measure of one's illness. There is scientific evidence to support this midrashic claim. Medical studies conducted at the VA Hospital in Dallas, Texas, indicate that cancer patients who pray daily with members of their religious community, require less pain medication than those who do not.¹¹ It is in a patient's medical best interest to permit others to perform the *mitzvah* of *bikkur cholim*.

Talmud Nedarim 40a tells of Akiva's visit to a sick disciple and his teaching that whoever does not visit the sick is like a shedder of blood. The passage builds upon the instruction found in 39b, that even a great person must visit a humble one. In this case, the great Rabbi Akiva visits his disciple. In so doing, Akiva makes himself humble, sweeping the floor clean until the disciple recovered.

The modern *mevaker(et)* can learn from Akiva's lesson. What might seem like a small, household chore can be the key to helping a *choleh* in the most profound way possible. Akiva's teaching that it is not only morally proper to visit the sick, but immoral not to do so is well taken. The modern person who chooses not to engage in the *mitzvah* of *bikkur cholim* actually causes harm to the *choleh*.

Sometimes a *choleh* feels anger toward those who neglected to visit him during illness. When family or friends intend to visit a *choleh*, but the person

¹¹ Dossey, Larry. Healing Words. San Francisco: Harper, 1993.

dies before they are able, the resulting feelings of guilt and remorse can be tremendous. Truly, a great deal of pain results for all parties when one does not visit the sick.

Bikkur cholim remains an important *mitzvah*. When it does not occur, blood is not shed, literally, but tears are. Failure to visit the sick in modern times can certainly be understood as a transgression of both a positive and a negative command.

From a clinical perspective, Talmud Berachot 5b is one of the more perplexing aggadot regarding *bikkur cholim*. Yet this aggadah has acted as a source of inspiration to many who specialize in the modern practice of *bikkur cholim*. The text is quoted in A Training Manual for Bikur Cholim Volunteers.¹² The booklet Give Me Your Hand derives its title from the passage.¹³

The passage is perplexing, because parts of it read as a model of what modern care givers would recommend against doing during a visit to the sick. In Give Me Your Hand, the very book which takes its title from Berachot 5b, we read:

“**DO** Listen actively by questioning and acknowledge what the patient is telling you.”

“**DON'T** Initiate discussion of a patient's medical condition or possibility of his death. Instead, follow his lead.”

In the midrash, Rabbi Yochanan sees Eliezer crying. He does not wait for Eliezer to respond to the question, “Why are you crying?” Instead, he chats

¹² Katz, Nina Dubler. Yad I'Yad: A Training Manual for Bikur Cholim Volunteers. New York: CCBC Press, 1992. pg 6.

¹³ Yurow, Jane. Give Me Your Hand. Washington, D.C. : Adas Israel Congregation 1988.

In the midrash, Rabbi Yochanan sees Eliezer crying. He does not wait for Eliezer to respond to the question, "Why are you crying?" Instead, he chats away about the possibility that Eliezer will die without having produced adequate wealth, scholarship, or offspring.

He tries to show that his own problems are worse than Eliezer's, by explaining to Eliezer that it is better to have no children than to have a child die. Yochanan complains that ten of his children have died, therefore Eliezer should not feel sorry over his own childlessness. To Rabbi Yochanan's credit, he does, finally hear Eliezer say, "That this beauty will perish in dust, for this I am crying."

Yochanan responds in the proper fashion, acknowledging Eliezer's feelings with the validating phrase, "I see. For this, surely you cry." Yochanan is able to cry with Eliezer. He exhibits empathy through his tears.

Yochanan asks for Eliezer's hand. This is an appropriate request. Modern protocol suggests that touching a patient in non-threatening ways is helpful, as long as the *mevaker(et)* asks permission first.¹⁴ What happens next is unclear. The text states, "He gave him his hand and he raised him."

It is unclear who raised whom in this passage. The authors of Give Me Your Hand assume that Eliezer raised Yochanan. In other words, the *mevaker* rises up "stronger and straighter" because of his exchange with a *choleh*.¹⁵

One could also argue that it was Yochanan who raised Eliezer. By holding Eliezer's hand, he could offer enough physical support that the *choleh* was able to stand. Perhaps Yochanan had mystical powers of some sort. After all, when he uncovered his arm, light fell. Perhaps he had the power to literally

¹⁴ Ibid. pg. 41.

¹⁵ Ibid. pg. 55.

elevate people. A modern reader might find this encouraging in that it allows for the possibility of "elevating" the mood of a *choleh*, if one cannot help him to walk.

The ambiguity of certain aggadic materials increases their value to the modern reader. When reading a rabbinic law, the modern reader must decide whether to accept, reject, or accomodate it. The aggadic materials, however, are truly eternal from the perspective of the progressive Jew. They are the stories of people who cared for one another during times of illness. They are stories, which can be told and retold, and understood in terms of a multiplicity of meanings. By "talking back" to these texts, we can better understand ourselves and our ancestors, and the multi-faceted nature of life, lived on the continuum between health and illness.

Appendix A:
Table of the Midrashei Aggadah
According to Types and Periods

Table of the *Midreshei Aggadah* according to types and periods.

Aggadic Works	Midrashim	Date C.E.	The Era
Apocalyptic and Eschatological Midrashim	Genesis Rabbah <i>Leviticus Rabbah</i> Lamentations Rabbah Esther Rabbah I <i>Pesikta de-Rav Kahana</i> Songs Rabbah Ruth Rabbah	400–500 500–640	Classical Amoraic Midrashim of the Early Period (400–640)
Megillat Antiochus Midrash Petirat Moshe ("Death of Moses") Tanna de - Vei Eliyahu ("Seder Eliyahu") Pirkei de-R. Eliezer Midrash Agur (called "Mishnat R. Eliezer") Midrash Yonah Midrash Petirat Aharon Divrei ha-Yamim shel Moshe Otiyyot de-R. Akiva Midrash Sheloshah ve-Arba'ah Midrash Eser Galuyyot Midrash va-Yissa'u Throne and Hippodromes of Solomon Midreshei Hanukkah Midreshei Yehudith Midrash Hallel Midrash Tadshe	Targum Sheni Midrash Esfah Midrash Proverbs Midrash Samuel Ecclesiastes Rabuah Midrash Haserot vi-Yterot <i>Deuteronomy Rabbah</i> <i>Tanhuma</i> <i>Tanhuma (Buber)</i> <i>Numbers Rabbah II</i> <i>Pesikta Rabbati</i> <i>Exodus Rabbah II</i> <i>Va-Yehi Rabbah</i> <i>The manuscripts of the Tanhuma Yelammedenu Midrashim</i> Midrash Tehillim I Exodus Rabbah I <i>Aggadat Bereshit</i> Aggadat Shir ha-Shirim (Zuta) Ruth Zuta Ecclesiastes Zuta Lamentations Zuta	640–900 (775–900) 900–1000	The Middle Period (640–1000)
Midrash Aseret ha-Dibberot Midrash Konen Midrash Avkir Alphabet of Ben Sira Midrash va-Yosha Sefer ha-Yashar Pesikta Hadta Midrash Temurah	Midrash Shir ha-Shirim Abba Guryon Esther Rabbah II Midrash Tehillim II Panim Aherim le-Esther (version 1) ▼ Lekah Tov (c. 1110) Midrash Aggadah Genesis Rabbati Numbers Rabbah I	1000–1100 1100–1200	The Late Period (1000–1200)
	▼ Yalkut Shimoni ▼ Midrash ha-Gadol ▼ Yalkut Makhiri ▼ Ein Ya'akov ▼ Haggadot ha-Talmud	1200–1300 1300–1400 1400–1550	The Period of Yalkutim (anthologies) 1200–1550

Notes: Names in italics are homiletical Midrashim; those marked by ▼ are anthologies; the rest are exegetical.

Appendix B:

Excerpted Texts in their Original Language

רש"י בראשית פרק יח

(א) **וירא אליו**. לבקר ^א את החולה. אמר רבי חמא בר חנינא. יום שלישי למילתו היה. ^ב ובא הקב"ה ושאל בשלמו (בבא מציעא פו:). **באלוני זמרא**. הוא שנתן לו עצה על המילה. ^ג לפיכך נגלה אליו בחלקו (ב"ר מב. ח). **ישב**. ישב ^ד כתיב. בקש לעמוד. אמר לו הקב"ה שב ואני אעמוד. ואתה סימן לבניך (ב"ר מת. ז). שעתיד אני להתיצב בעדת הדיינים ^ה והן יושבין. שנאמר אלהים נצב בעדת אל (תהלים פב. א). **פתח האהל**. לראות אם יש עובר ושב ^ו ויכניסם בביתו. **כחם היום**. הוציא הקב"ה חמה מנרתיקה ^ז שלא להטריחו באורחים (בבא מציעא פו:). ולפי שראהו מצטער שלא היו אורחים באים. הביא מלאכים עליו ^ח בדמות אנשים. (ב) **והנה שלשה אנשים**. אחד לבשר את שרה. ^ט ואחד להפוך את סדום. ואחד לרפאות את אברהם. שאין מלאך אחד עושה שתי שליחות (ב"ר נ. ב). תדע לך ^י שכן. כל הפרשה הוא מזכירן בלשון רבים. ויאכלו. ויאמרו אליו. ובבשורה נאמר ויאמר שוב אשוב אליך. ובהפיכת סדום הוא אומר כי לא אוכל לעשות דבר לבלתי הפכי. ורפאל שרפא את אברהם ^י הלך משם להציל את לוט (ב"ר שם). ^{יא} הוא שנאמר ויהי כהוציאם אותם החוצה ויאמר המלט על נפשך. למדת שהאחד היה מציל. **נצבים עליו** ^{יב} לפניו. כמו ועליו מטה מנשה (במדבר ב. כ). אבל לשון נקיה הוא כלפי המלאכים. **וירא**. מהו וירא וירא שני פעמים. הראשון כמשמעו. והשני לשון הבנה. נסתכל שהיו נצבים במקום אחד. והבין שלא היו רוצים להטריחו. ואף על פי שיודעים היו שיצא לקראתם. עמדו במקומם לכבודו. ולהראותו שלא רצו להטריחו. וקדם הוא ורץ לקראתם. (כך הגירסא ברש"י ישן) בבבא מציעא (פו:) כתיב נצבים עליו. וכתיב וירץ לקראתם. ^{יג} כד חזוהו דהוה שרי ואסר פירשו הימנו. מיד וירץ לקראתם. (ג) **ויאמר אדני**

רש"י בראשית פרק כא

מוגד. כיון שקרב למות. הוסיפה להתרחק: (יז) **את קול הנער.** מכאן שיפה תפלת החולה ^ז מתפלת אחרים עליו. והיא קודמת להתקבל (בר נג. יד.): **באשר הוא שם.** לפי מעשים שהוא עושה עכשיו הוא נדון. ^פ ולא לפי מה שהוא עתיד לעשות. לפי שהיו מלאכי השרת מקטרגים ואומרים. רבונו של עולם. מי שעתיד זרעו ^ז להמית בניך בצמא אתה מעלה לו באר. והוא משיבם. עכשיו מה הוא. צדיק או רשע. אמרו לו צדיק. (ר"ל בענין זה שאינו ראוי לעונש מיתה בצמא ודו"ק). אמר להם. לפי מעשיו של עכשיו אני דנו. וזהו באשר הוא שם. והיכן המית את ישראל בצמא. כשהגלם נבוכדנצר. שנאמר **משא בערב וגוי לקראת צמא התיו מים וגוי** (ישעיה כא. יג-יד). כשהיו מוליכין אותם אצל ערביים. היו ישראל אומרים לשבאים. בבקשה מכם. הוליכנו אצל בני דודנו ישמעאל וירחמו עלינו. שנאמר אורחות דודנים (שם). אל תקרי דודנים. אלא דודים. ואלו יוצאים לקראתם ומביאין להם בשר ודג מלוח. ונודות נפוחים. כסבורים ישראל שמלאים מים. וכשמכניסו לתוך פיו ופותחו. הרוח נכנס בגופו ומת: (כ) **רובה קשת.** יורה חצים בקשת. **קשת.**

רש"י יחזקאל פרק לד פסוק יא ד"ה (יא) ובקרתים

(יא) ובקרתים - ל' בקר חולים:

כלומר שלא היה אברהם משיג הנבואה עד הכינו נפשו בתחלה להשגת מלאך, ויעלה מן המדרגה ההיא למעלה דבור הנבואה, אבל משה מוכן לנבואה בכל עת:

הנה בכל מקום יתעוררו החכמים להודיענו כי ראית המלאך איננה נבואה ואין הרואים מלאכים והמדרגים עמם מכלל הנביאים כאשר הזכרתי בדניאל, אבל היא מראה, תקרא "גלוי עינים", כמו ויגל השם את עיני כלעם וירא את מלאך ה' (במדבר כב לא), וכן ויתפלל אלישע ויאמר ה' פקח נא את עיני ויראה (מ"ב יז): אבל במקום אשר יזכיר המלאכים בשם "אנשים" כענין הפרשה הזאת ופרשת לוט, וכן ויאבק איש עמו (להלן לב כה), וכן וימצאהו איש (שם לז טו), על דעת רבותינו (תנחומא וישב ב) הוא כבוד נברא במלאכים, יקרא אצל היודעים "מלבוש", יושג לעיני בשר בזכי הנפשות כחסידים ובני הנביאים. ולא אוכל לפרש. והמקום אשר תמצא בו ראית ה' ודבור מלאך, או ראית מלאך ודבור ה', ככתוב בדברי משה בתחילת נבואתו (שמות ג ב - ד), ובדברי זכריה (ג א - ב), עוד אנלה בו דברי אלהים חיים ברמיזות (עיין שמות ג ב). וענין ויאכלו - אמרו חכמים (ב"ר מח יד) ראשון ראשון מסתלק. וענין ההסתלקות תבין אותו מדבר מנוח אם תזכה אליו. והנה פירוש הפרשה הזאת, אחרי שאמר כי בעצם היום הזה נמול אברהם (לעיל יז כו), אמר שנראה אליו השם בהיותו חולה במילתו, יושב ומתקרב בפתח אהלו מפני חום היום אשר יחלישנו, והזכיר זה להודיע שלא היה מתכוין לנבואה לא נופל על פניו ולא מתפלל, ואף על פי כן באה אליו המראה הזאת:

באלוני ממרא - להודיע המקום אשר בו נימול. וזה גילוי השכינה אליו למעלה וכבוד לו, כענין שבא במשכן ויצאו ויברכו את העם וירא כבוד ה' אל כל העם (ויקרא ט כג), כי מפני השתדלותם במצות המשכן זכו לראית השכינה. ואין גלוי השכינה כאן וכאן לצוות להם מצוה או לדבור כלל, אלא גמול המצוה הנעשית כבר, ולהודיע כי רצה האלהים את מעשיהם, כענין שנאמר (תהלים יז טו) אני בצדק אחזה פניך אשבעה בהקיץ תמונתך. וכן ביעקב אמר (להלן לב ב) ויפגעו בו מלאכי אלהים, ואין שם דבור ולא שחרשו בו דבר, רק שזכה לראית מלאכי עליון, וידע כי מעשיו רצויים. וכן היה לאברהם בראית השכינה זכות והבטחה. וכן אמרו (מכילתא שירתא ג) ביורדי הים, שאמרו "זה אלי ואנוהו" ראתה שפחה על הים מה שלא ראה יחזקאל הנביא, זכות להם בעת הנס הגדול שהאמינו בה' ובמשה עבדו. ופעמים יבא בשעת הקצף ויאמרו כל העדה לרגום אותם באבנים וכבוד ה' נראה באהל מועד אל כל בני ישראל (במדבר יד י), ויהיה זה להנין על עבדיו הצדיקים ולכבודם. ואל תחוש להפסק הפרשה, כי הענין מחובר, ולכן אמר "וירא אליו" ולא אמר "וירא ה' אל אברהם", אבל בפרשה רצה לסדר כבוד הנעשה לו בעת שעשה המילה, ואמר כי נגלית עליו השכינה ושלח אליו מלאכיו לבשר את אשתו וגם להציל לוט אחיו בעבדו, כי אברהם נתבשר בבן מפי השכינה כבר, ושרה מפי המלאך שדבר עם אברהם כדי שתשמע שרה, כמו שאמר ושרה שומעת. וזו כוונתם שאמרו (סוטה יד א) לבקר את החולה, שלא היה לדבור אלא לכבוד לו. ועוד אמרו (ב"ר מח ד) מזבח אדמה תעשה לי (שמות כ כד), ומה אם זה שבנה מזבח לשמי הריני נגלה עליו ומברכו, אברהם שמל עצמו לשמי על אחת כמה וכמה. ושם כיוונו עוד בזה לומר שהיה לו במראה השכינה רפוי למחלת המילה, כי כן ראוי להיות כדכתיב (משלי טז טו) באור פני מלך חיים: וטעם נצבים עליו - שהיו עומדים לנגדו מסתכלים, כלשון הנצב על הקוצרים (רות ב ה), משרי הנצבים (מ"א ה ל), ולפי שהוא יושב והם היו עומדים ורואים בו אמר "עליו", וזה טעם וירא וירץ לקראתם - כי כאשר ראה אותם עומדים נגדו ולא היו הולכים לדרכם רץ לקראתם להביאם אל ביתו. וטעם מפתח האהל - להניד שהיה עדיין יושב שם אחרי הסתלק ממנו מראה השכינה: ויתכן שיהיה "עליו" על האהל, שהיו קרובים אליו מן הצד האחר שלא כנגד הפתח, והיו שם נצבים ולא היו מתקרבים אל אברהם, כטעם חונים על הים (שמות יד ט):

בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשה ח

יג א"ר אבהו נטל הקב"ה כוס של ברכה וברכן, אר"י ברבי סימון מיכאל וגבריאלי הם היו שושבינין של אדם הראשון. אמר רבי שמלאי מצינו שהקב"ה מברך חתנים ומקשט כלות ומבקר חולים וקובר מתים, מברך חתנים מניין, ויברך אותם אלהים, ומקשט כלות מניין, (שם/בראשית/ב) ויבן ה' אלהים את הצלע, מבקר חולים מניין, שנא' (שם/בראשית/יח) וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא, קובר מתים מניין, (דברים לד) ויקבר אותו בגיא, א"ר שמואל בר נחמן בשם רבי יונתן אף מראה פנים לאכל, הדא הוא דכתיב (בראשית לה) וירא אלהים אל יעקב עוד וגו', מה ברכה ברכו רבי יונתן אמר ברכת אבליים.

ד כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה, רבי יודן בשם רבי אלכסנדר זו הובריא, ורבנן אמרי זו ביקור חולים, ר' עזריה בשם ר"י מתחלה צדק לבסוף משפט, הא כיצד אברהם היה מקבל את העוברים ואת השבים, משהיו אוכלים ושותים אמר להם ברכו, אמרו ליה מה נאמר, א"ל אמרו ברוך אל עולם שאכלנו משלו, אם מקבל עליו וברוך הוה אכיל ושתי ואזיל, ואי לא הוה מקבל עליה וברוך, הוה א"ל הב מה דעלך, ואמר מה אית לך עלי, הוה א"ל חד קסיט דחמר בעשרה פולרין, וחד ליטרא דקופר בי' פולרין, וחד עיגול דריפתא בי' פולרין, מאן יהיב לך חמרא במדברא, מאן יהיב לך קופר במדברא, מאן יהיב לך עיגולא במדברא, מן דהוה חמי החיא עקתא דהוה עקי ליה הוה אמר ברוך אל עולם שאכלנו משלו הה"ד לכתחלה צדקה ולבסוף משפט, למען הביא ה' על אברהם ונו', חני ר"ש בן יוחאי אומר כל מי שיש לו בן יגע בתורה כאילו לא מת, שנאמר למען הביא ה' על אברהם את אשר דבר אליו לא נאמר אלא את אשר דבר ה' עליו.

ויקרא רבה (וילנא) פרשה יג

ב רשב"י פתח (חבקות ג) עמד וימודד ארץ מדד הקב"ה כל האומות ולא מצא אומה שהיתה ראויה לקבל את התורה אלא חזר המדבר מדד הקב"ה כל ההרים ולא מצא הר שתנתן בו את התורה אלא סיני מדד הקב"ה את כל העיירות ולא מצא עיר שיבנה בו בהמ"ק = בית המקדש = אלא ירושלים מדד הקב"ה כל הארצות ולא מצא ארץ שראויה לינתן לישראל אלא ארץ ישראל הה"ד עמד וימודד ארץ ראה ונו', רב אמר דמן של כנענים התיר וממון התיר דמן התיר (דברים כ) לא תחיה כל נשמה ממונן התיר שנאמר (שם / דברים כ') ואכלת את שלל אויביך, ר' הונא אמר התיר זונין שלהן כדכתיב (איוב יב) מוסר מלכים פתח עולא ביראה בשם רשב"י אמר משל לאחד שיצא לגורן וכלבו וחמורו עמו הטעין לחמורו חמשה סאין ולכלבו שני סאין והיה החמור מהלך והכלב מלחית נטל ממנו אחד ונתן ע"ג החמור אף על פי כן היה מלחית א"ל את טעון מלחית לית את טעון מלחית, כך אפי' שבעה מצות שקבלו בני נח כיון שלא יכלו לעמוד בהן עמד ופרקום לישראל, אמר רבי תנחום בר חנילאי משל לרופא שנכנס לבקר שני חולים אחד לחיים ואחד למיתה אמר לזה של חיים זה תאכל וזה לא תאכל ושאינו לחיים אמר כל דבעי הכו ליה כך עובדי כוכבים שאינן לחיי העוה"ב כתיב בהם (בראשית ט) כירק עשב נתתי לכם את כל, אבל ישראל שהם לחיי העולם הבא זאת הבהמה אשר תאכלו.

[illegible]

מדרש רבה קהלת פרשה ז סימן ח

ד א"ר סימון מצינו שהלכו לבית המשתה ולא נתפרשו שמותן, לבית האבל ונתפרשו שמותן, עוג הלך במשתה אברהם ולא נתפרש שמו, שלשת ריעי איוב הלכו לבית האבל ונתפרשו שמותן, מצינו שהלכו לבית המשתה ולא נדחו מגיהנם, והלכו לבית האבל ונדחו מגיהנם, עוג היה במשתה אברהם ולא נדחה מגיהנם ואלו שהלכו לבית האבל נדחו מגיהנם, אמר ר' יששכר דכפר מנדי דרכן של רשעים להנתן בדיוטא תחתונה של גיהנם שנאמר (איוב ל"ד) תחת רשעים ספקם, שלשת ריעי איוב הלכו לבית האבל ונדחו מגיהנם דכתיב (איוב ב') ויבא איש ממקומו, איש מביתו איש מעירו איש מארצו אין כתיב כאן, אלא איש ממקומו, ממקום שנתבצר להם בגיהנם נדחו ונצולו ממנו, מצינו שהלכו לבית המשתה ולא שרת עליהם רוח הקדש זה עוג, ושלשת ריעי איוב הלכו לבית האבל ושרת עליהם רוח הקדש הה"ד (איוב ד') ויען אליפז ויען בלדד, תני בשם רבי מאיר כל מקום שנא' ענייה ואמירה כה ככה, אלו בלשון הקדש ברוח הקדש הוא מדבר.

[יא] כל ארחות ה' חסד ואמת. יכול לכל, תלמוד לומר לנוצרי בריתו. דבר אחר כל ארחות ה'. בשעה שאמר הקב"ה למשה לך אמור להם לישראל אחרי ה' אלהיכם חלכו (דברים יג ה), אמרו לו רבינו משה ומי יכול לילך אחרי, והלא כתיב וה' בסופה ובסערה דרכו (נחום א ג), ואומר בים דרכך ושבילך וגו' (תהלים עז כ), אמר להם אני אומר לכם דרכיו של הקב"ה, כל ארחות ה' חסד ואמת, חסד זו גמילות חסדים, ואמת זו תורה, ולמי נתן, לנוצרי בריתו. אמר ר' שמלאי מצינו שהקב"ה מקשט כלות, ומזווגן אצל חתנים, ומבקר חולים, וקובר מתים. מקשט כלות ומזווגן אצל חתנים מניין, שנאמר ויבן ה' אלהים את הצלע (בראשית ב כב), מלמד שקילעה הקב"ה את חוה והביאה אצל אדם, שכן בכרכי הים קורין לקלעיטא בנייתא. מבקר חולים, שנאמר וירא אליו ה' באלוני ממרא (בראשית יח א). וקובר מתים, שנאמר ויקבור אותו (בגיא) [בגו] (דברים לד ו).

[יח] נוצר תאנה יאכל פריה. אמר ר' לוי אם זכה אדם בתורה בעולם הזה, יאכל פריה לעולם הבא. תמן תנינן אלו דברים שאין להם שיעור, הפאה [והבכורים] והראיון וגמילות חסדים ותלמוד תורה, ואלו דברים שאדם אוכל פירותיהם בעולם הזה והקרן קיימת לעולם הבא, כבוד אב ואם, וגמילות חסדים, והבאת שלום בין אדם לחבירו, ובקור חולים, ועיון תפלה, והשכמת בית המדרש, ותלמוד תורה כנגד כלם, לכך נאמר נוצר תאנה יאכל פריה.

ישראל אתו שמואל ואליהו הנביא

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+ירמיהו יז+ כסא כבוד מרום מראשון, שמו של משיח - דכתיב: +תהלים עב+ יהי שמו לעולם וגו'! אלא הכי קאמר
 אי איברי ליה פומא - מוטב, ואם לא - יברא ה'. והכתיב: +קהלת א+ אין כל חדש תחת השמש! הכי קאמר: אי הכא
 לא מקרב פומא להכא ליקרב. דרש רבא, ואמרי לה: אמר ר' יצחק, מאי דכתיב: +חבקוק ג+ שמש ירח עמד
 זבולה, שמש וירח בזבול מאי בעיין? והא ברקיע קביעי! מלמד, שעלו שמש וירח מרקיע לזבול ואמרו לפניו:
 רבונו של עולם, אם אתה עושה דין לבן עמרם אנו מאירים, ואם לאו - אין אנו מאירין! באותה שעה ירה בהן
 חיצים וחניתות, אמר להם: בכל יום ויום משתחווים לכם ואתם מאירים, בכבודי לא מחיתם, בכבוד בשר ודם
 מחיתם! ובכל יום ויום יורין בהן חיצין וחניתות ומאירים, שנא: +חבקוק ג+ לאור חציך יהלכו וגו'. תניא: ביקור
 חולים אין לה שיעור. מאי אין לה שיעור? סבר רב יוסף למימר: אין שיעור למתן שכרה, אמר ליה אבוי: וכל
 מצות מי יש שיעור למתן שכרין? והא חנן: הוי זהיר במצוה קלה כבחמורה, שאין אתה יודע מתן שכרן של מצות!
 אלא אמר אבוי: אפי' גדול אצל קטן. רבא אמר: אפי' מאה פעמים ביום. אמר רבי אחא בר חנינא: כל המבקר
 חולה - נוטל אחד מששים בצערו. אמרי ליה: אם כן, ליעלון שיתין ולוקמוה! אמר ליה: כעישורייתא דבי רבי,
 ובבן גילו, דתניא, רבי אומר: בת הניזונית מנכסי אחין נוטלת עישור נכסים, אמרו לו לרבי: לדברייך, מי שיש לו
 עשר בנות וכן, אין לו לבן במקום בנות כלום! אמר להן: ראשונה נוטלת עישור נכסים, שניה - במה ששיירה,
 שלישית - במה ששיירה, וחוזרות וחולקות בשוה. רב חלבו חלש, נפק אכריז רב כהנא

תלמוד ירושלמי מסכת נדרים דף מ.א

הוא נותן אצבעו בין שיניה. שכן אם רצה להפר מיפר. אמר אי איפשי
 שתהא נזירה יוציא ויתן כתובה ר' יוסי ורבי שמעון אומרין היא נתנה
 אצבעה בין שיניה שכן אם רצה להקם מוקם. או שאמרה איפשר
 שאהא נזירה תצא שלא בכתובתה כמשנה ראשונה. דל כן מה כן
 א"ר מאיר ורבי יהודה (כמשנה) ואפילו כמשנה האחרונה מפני מה
 אינו מיפר לה רבי יוסי ור' שמעון כמשנה האחרונה ואפילו תימא
 כמשנה ראשונה מפני מה נדרה:

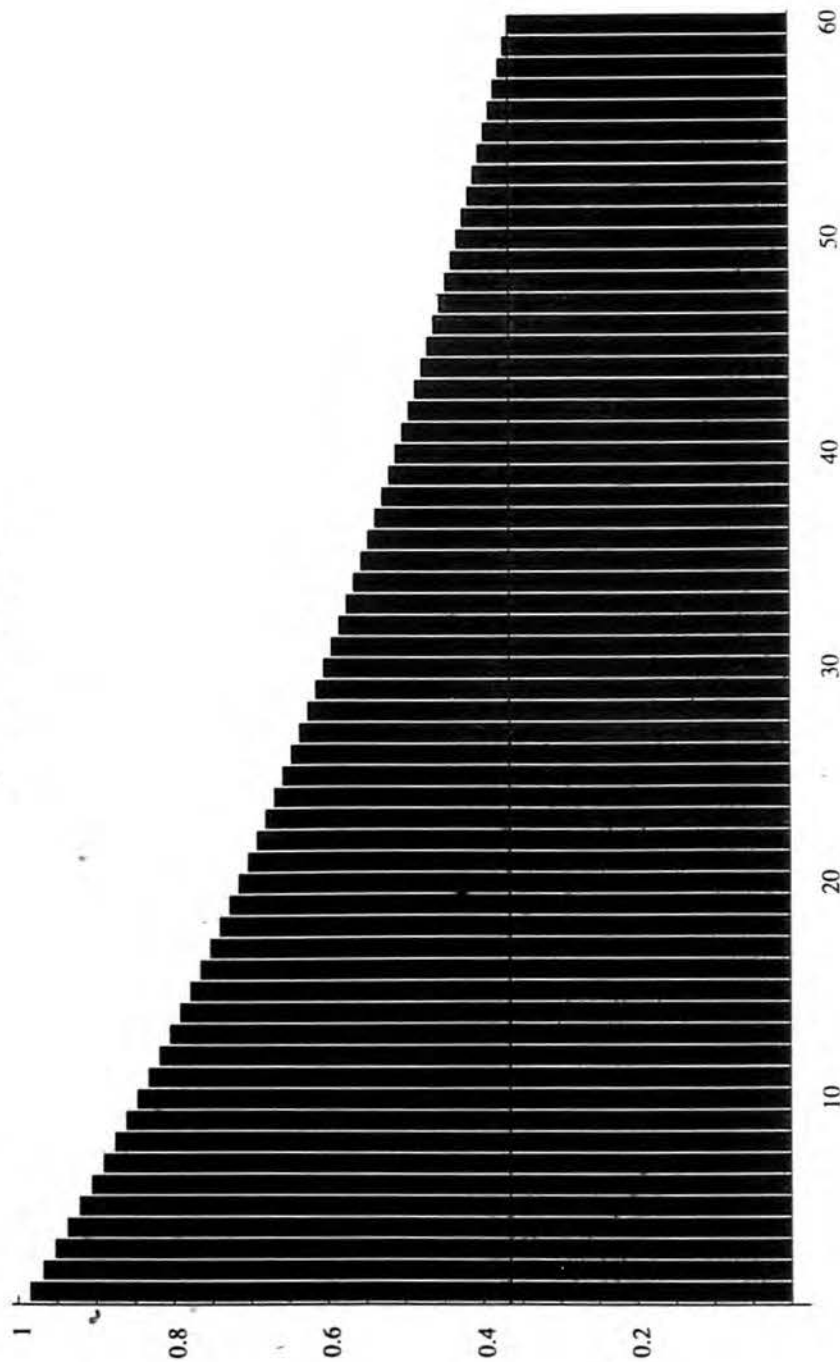
תלמוד ירושלמי מסכת ברכות דף ה.ב.

יקרי מן קומי איקריה דבריי איקרי לא חשיב כלום מן קדם איקריה דבריי. אעירה שחר אנא הוינא מעורר שחרה שחרה לא הוה מעורר לי. והיה יצרו מקטרגו ואומר לו דוד דרכן של מלכים להיות השחר מעוררן ואת אמר אעירה שחר דרכן של מלכים להיות ישינן עד שלש שעות ואת אמר חצות לילה אקום והוא אומר על משפטי צדקך. ומה היה דוד עושה ר' פינחס בשם ר' אלעזר בר' מנחם היה נוטל נבל וכינור ונותנו מראשותיו ועומד בחצי הלילה ומנגן בהם כדי שישמעו חבירי תורה. ומה היו חבירי תורה אומרים ומה אם דוד המלך עוסק בתורה אנו עאכ"ו. א"ר לוי כנור היה תלוי כנגד חלונותיו של דוד והיה רוח צפונית מנשבת בלילה ומנפנפת בו והיה מנגן מאליו הה"ד והיה כנגן המנגן כנגן במנגן אין כתב כאן אלא כנגן המנגן הכינור היה מנגן מאליו. מה מקיים רבי טעמא דרבי נתן ראש האשמורת התיכונה א"ר הונא סופה של שנייה וראשה של שלישית הן מתכנות את הלילה. אמר ר' מנא ויאות מי כתיב תיכונות לא תיכונה קדמיתא לא מתחשבא דעד כדון ברייתא עירין: פיסקא וחכמים אומרים עד חצות: רבי יסא בשם ר' יוחנן הלכה כחכמים רבי יסא מפקד לחברייא אין בעיתון מתעסקא באוריתא אתון קרייה שמע קודם חצות ומתעסקין מילתיה אמרה שהלכה כחכמים מילתיה אמרה שאמר דברים אחר אמת ויציב. תני הקורא את שמע בבית הכנסת בשחר יצא ידי חובתו בערב לא יצא ידי חובתו מה בין הקורא בשחרית ומה בין הקורא בערבית ר' הונא בשם רב יוסף מה טעם אמרו אדם צריך לקרות שמע בביתו בערב

Appendix C:
Graph of a Variation on Zeno's Paradox
Corresponding to Talmud Nedarim 39b



60 Visitors



Appendix D:
English Translation of
Caro's Laws on Visiting the Sick

LAWS OF VISITING THE SICK
(FROM JOSEPH CARO'S SHULCHAN ARUCH)
16TH CENTURY

1. It is a religious duty to visit the sick. Relatives and friends may enter at once and strangers after 3 days. If the sickness springs upon him, both may enter at that time.

2. Even a prominent person must visit a humble one, even many times per day and even if the visitor is not of his affinity (same age). One who increases his visits is considered praiseworthy, provided he does not trouble him. (Note: Some say that even an enemy may visit a sick person, but Caro disagrees. What do you think?)

3. One who visits the sick may neither sit upon a bed, nor upon a chair, nor upon a stool, but must (reverently) wrap himself and sit in front of him, for the Divine Presence is above the top side of the bed. (Note: This applies when the sick person lies on the ground. If the sick person is on the bed, it is permissible to sit on a chair or stool).

4. One must not visit the sick during the first 3 hours of the day, for every sick person's illness is alleviated in the morning, and there is no need to pray for him; during the last three hours of the day, the illness grows worse, and one gives up hope to pray for him. (One who visited a sick person and did not pray for him has not fulfilled the religious duty of visiting the sick).

5. When one prays for him, if in his presence, one may pray in any language one desires; if one prays, not in his presence, one should pray only in Hebrew.

6. One should combine him with other Jewish sick by saying, "May G-d have compassion upon you amongst the other sick persons of Israel," and on the sabbath, one says, "It is the Sabbath, when it is forbidden to cry out and healing will come soon".

7. He is told to consider his affairs whether he lent to or deposited (money) with others, or vice a versa, and that he should not fear death on account of this.

8. One must not visit those suffering with bowel disease, eye disease, or headaches. Likewise, whosoever is very sick and conversation is injurious to him must not be visited in his presence, but one may enter the outer chamber and ask and inquire regarding him, whether it is necessary to sweep or sprinkle the ground before him or anything similar to this, and hear his suffering and pray for him.

9. One must visit the sick of the non-Jew in the interests of peace.

10. In the case of those suffering with bowel disease, the man must not attend upon the woman, but the woman may attend upon the man.

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