

*Rabbi Simcha Lefkowitz*

## COMFORTING THE SICK



*a personal perspective*



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## *A Personal Perspective*

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*Three years ago I experienced an unusual condition that totally incapacitated me for a period of time. With Hashem's help, the support of my wife Shoshana, my family, friends from Congregation Anshei Chesed and others, I have been able to regain a portion of my functions and have begun to partially return to some my regular-life activities. Both during this period and after, I reflected on what was said to me by well-wishers, and I sought insight and comfort from the words and teachings of Chazal. I would like to share with you some of what I have learned from this process.*

I have struggled for many years to understand fully the meaning of the *bracha* we give to every *choleh*, 'May you

have a *refuah shlayma*.' 'May you be healed completely.' Why is it necessary to specify '*shlayma*'? Would anyone wish for a *choleh* to be healed only partially? What is a *refuah* that is not *shlayma*?

One morning during *davening*, the meaning of this phrase became very clear to me: When you become seriously ill, the sickness attacks your body physically and the *neshoma* emotionally and spiritually. Almost always, there are feelings of depression, anxiety, tension and loss of *bitachon* and *emunah*. These emotions attack your soul, your *neshoma* in complex ways. Often the *choleh* is healed from his physical disease but continues to be plagued with many difficulties due to his '*neshoma* disease.' This part of the illness can be longer-lasting and more insidious than the physical part. That's the meaning of *shlayma*—that the *choleh* should be healed entirely, both in body and spirit. So, when you wish someone a '*refuah shlayma*,' know what you are saying! When visiting a *choleh*, even though you may not be able to help him physically, there are many types of healing you can bring for his 'spiritual sickness.'

## **THE TRUE PURPOSE OF BIKUR CHOLIM**

People ask, 'What can I really do for the *choleh*? Why am I really here?' As you visit the patient, you wonder what to say. Often, people ask the *choleh* questions like, 'Have

you tried this?’ ‘What about that hospital or that specialist?’ ‘What does the doctor say?’ These questions can be bothersome, annoying and even insulting. You are not there with a stethoscope and a white coat. For the average visitor, there is not much you can do for the patient’s physical health.

There is, on the other hand, a great deal you can do for the *choleh’s* emotional well-being. It is well-known that the beginning of healing comes from the spiritual. Even secular books discuss that this is the gateway, the pathway for healing. Norman Cousins described how a program of humor and laughter raised his level of endorphins, which helped his recovery from cancer. You bring *refuah* to the *choleh* in the form of personal interaction and even by acting silly. If we consider your visit from this point of view, you can be just as helpful to the patient as the doctor. You’re not just a visitor—you’re a doctor for the soul, and you don’t need a license for that. Friendly conversation, prayers, singing, jokes, and balloons are all available without a prescription. The visitor with a caring heart can bring about real changes in the *choleh’s neshoma*.

## COMFORTING THE CHOLEH

The question of how to comfort a *choleh* and how one should act when visiting a *choleh* is one that requires great sensitivity and thoughtfulness. The usual conversational approaches that might work for people with

minor or temporary problems need to be modified for the *choleh* whose situation is more severe. Only someone who has been on the receiving end of such remarks can understand first-hand the positive and negative effects they can have.

One type of statement that is well-meant, but actually quite detrimental is, 'See, someone else has it bad too', or 'So-and-so has it worse than you.' Other damaging comments to a *choleh* are a visitor's reports that someone has recently died, or someone else is still sick, or another has had a heart attack. The visitor's intention is to make the *choleh* feel stronger by comparison or to make him understand how fortunate he should feel that he is not as ill as so-and-so. In reality these statements actually have the opposite effect, causing a *choleh* to feel even worse. Why?

Consider this story from the 14<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the *Avos D'Rabbi Nassan*:

כשמת בנו של רבן יוחנן בן זכאי נכנסו תלמידיו לנחמו.  
נכנס רבי אליעזר וישב לפניו וא"ל רבי רצונך אומר דבר  
אחד לפניך א"ל אמור. א"ל אדה"ר היה לו בן ומת וקבל  
עליו תנחומין. אף אתה קבל תנחומין א"ל לא די לי  
שאני מצטער בעצמי אלא שהזכרת לי צערו של  
אדה"ר. נכנס ר' יהושע וא"ל רצונך אומר דבר אחד  
לפניך א"ל אמור. א"ל איוב היו לו בנים ובנות  
ומתו כולם ביום אחד וקבל עליהם תנחומין אף אתה  
קבל תנחומין. א"ל לא די לי שאני מצטער בעצמי אלא  
שהזכרת לי צערו של איוב.

נכנס ר' יוסי וישב לפניו א"ל רבי רצונך אומר דבר אחד  
לפניך א"ל אמור. א"ל אהרן היו לו שני בנים גדולים  
ומתו שניהם ביום אחד וקבל עליהם תנחומין ואף אתה

קבל תנחומין. א"ל לא די לי שאני מצטער בעצמי אלא שהזכרתני צערו של אהרן.

נכנס ר"ש וא"ל רבי רצונך אומר דבר אחד לפניך א"ל אמור. א"ל דוד המלך היה לו בן ומת וקבל עליו תנחומין ואף אתה קבל תנחומין אף אתה רבי קבל תנחומין. א"ל לא די שאני מצטער בעצמי אלא שהזכרתני צערו של דוד המלך.

נכנס ר"א בן עזריה כיון שראהו אמר לשמשו טול לפני כלי ולך אחרי לבית המרחץ לפי שאדם גדול הוא ואיני יכול לעמוד בו נכנס וישב לפניו ואמר לו אמשול לך משל למה"ד לאדם שהפקיד אצלו המלך פקדון בכל יום ויום היה בוכה וצועק ואומר אוי לי אימתי אצא מן הפקדון הזה בשלום אף אתה רבי היה לך בן קרא תורה מקרא נביאים וכתובים משנה הלכות ואגדות ונפטר מן העולם בלא חטא ויש לך לקבל עליך תנחומים כשחזרת פקדונך שלם א"ל ר' אלעזר בני נחמתני כדרך שבני אדם מנחמין.

The students of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai came to console him upon the loss of his son.

First came Rabbi Eliezer, who pointed out that although Adam HaRishon had lost a son, Hevel, he accepted consolation. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai was not consoled. Other students (Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Yosi, and Rabbi Shimon) followed and listed other personalities from *Tanach* (Iyov, Aharon, Dovid) who were consolable despite their tragic personal losses. The students' message was, "Rebbi, you should also accept consolation and be comforted." But Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai remained grief-stricken. He asked, "Don't I have enough troubles of my own? Must I also be concerned with the troubles of Adam

HaRishon, Iyov, Aharon and Dovid?”

What was wrong with these messages? Why was this approach counter-productive? Why was Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai not comforted? Think for a moment. The *choleh* is already hypersensitive to pain and suffering because of his own situation. He understands only too well the anguish his family must endure because of it. Hearing about other misfortunes only adds to his own burden. The visitor doesn't realize this, because he cannot fully internalize the pain of the sick as the *choleh* does.

The manner in which Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai is finally comforted is also very instructive. Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah told him a story in which a king gives one of his subjects a possession to guard. Day and night, the man worries, lest something happen to the object. He is greatly relieved when the king finally reclaims it. Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said, “Rabbi Yochanan, your son, too, was a possession of the King. You raised him and taught him Torah. When the King reclaimed him, he was still as pure as when you first received him.” Upon hearing this, Rabbi Yochanan was finally consoled.

The allegory reminded Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai of his purpose in life, and accentuated to him the positives that existed. It enabled him to think of better times and connected him to positive images.



## KEEPING THE CONNECTION

Often the *choleh*—cut off from his job, friends, family and responsibilities—loses connection with his life purposes. He suffers from a sense of helplessness and isolation. The *choleh* says, “Look at what has become of me. I have no idea what is happening out there beyond my hospital bed. What’s going on at work? at home? at the office? I can’t help out no matter how much I want to.” This understandably leads to intense feelings of low self-worth.

Many visitors are hesitant to discuss business and work with the *choleh* on the assumption that such discussion will depress him. On the contrary, these talks are most beneficial and therapeutic. It is helpful if the visitor can point out and build up the *choleh’s* past accomplishments, and reconnect him to what he was doing before the illness began. For example, work associates should discuss the business and what is happening in the office. Neighbors should talk about local events. Family members should discuss domestic events, everyday occurrences, and even simple *narishkeit*. Synagogue members can share the latest chitchat and news (not *loshen hora*). Neighbors should talk about local events. Such discussions are not a burden; rather, they keep the *choleh* connected to his former life and involved in the world around him. They serve to prevent the *choleh* from slipping into deeper feelings of isolation.

Just prior to being stricken, I had sent a

draft of my then upcoming *Shabbos Shuva Drasha* to my good friend, Rabbi Shimshon Sherer, *Shlita*, for feedback, as I often do. As I was lying on a gurney waiting for the attendant to take me into the hospital elevator to go for some more tests, Rabbi Sherer came running up to talk with me. He told me how much he liked the way I had worked a story about Rabbi Akiva Eiger and the *Nesivos* into the *drasha*. Then and there he asked me to repeat the story to him, and suggested that I call him later for other suggestions.

We asked the attendant that was transporting me to stop, and with elevator doors open, I repeated the story to him. I vividly recall thinking, as the elevator descended, 'He really believes that I will be giving that *drasha*! He really believes that I will be able to resume my former life.' I have tremendous *chizuk* from that conversation to this very day.

## FINDING THE SWEETNESS

Let us consider the situation of a *choleh* who is worried. After all, his own future may be uncertain, and he is anxious about how the needs of his family will be met, now that he is no longer such a strong presence. A myriad of worries pile up in his mind, and combine with his feeling of powerlessness. What comfort can the visitor offer such a patient, who is overwhelmed in this way? In this case, the best approach is to focus on some positive in the *choleh's* life, despite his

admittedly difficult circumstances.

Even in a tragedy, some sweetness can always be found. Hagaon Harav Gamliel Rabinovitch, *Shlita*, of Jerusalem explained this to me. In the days when Yosef was sold by his brothers, caravans most often carried merchandise like kerosene that had a very foul smell. *Hashem* arranged, however, that the caravan that would take Yosef away would smell sweet, because it carried *besamim*—aromatic spices. *Hashem* performed this miracle especially for Yosef, so that he would not suffer from the usual rank odors. Do you suppose that at the very moment that Yosef's brothers sold him into slavery, he sat back on the camel and said, 'Look how fortunate I am that this caravan is carrying fragrant spices?' What message did *Hashem* wish to give Yosef (and us)? As painful this betrayal by his brothers was for Yosef, there was still something positive to be appreciated in the event. The lesson is that in every tragedy there will always be a bit of sweetness. Our mission is to seek out and find the *besamim* in our own situation.

A *choleh* will benefit greatly if a visitor can help him find some 'sweetness' in his current situation. Point out the good things that remain in his life. For example, a visitor might say, 'You must be so proud to see how your family has risen to the occasion.' 'Look what your friends have done for you.' 'What a tribute to you that they care so much they have even done this.' I remember clearly that when my own family and friends spoke

to me about the positives in my own life, my *hakaras hatov* to *Hashem* came back into focus. This gave me the strength to handle my difficulties.

In my own situation, I easily found so much *besamim*—sweetness. The incredible strength and faith of my wife and children in the most trying times would have been enough to bolster me. When I heard how my children were learning in yeshiva with such devotion, as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on in their lives, that gave me even more strength. But the ultimate sweetness was the *zechus* of marrying off my children to wonderful spouses and the ability to enjoy the *nachas* of my youngest child Zev Dov's *bar mitzvah*. Against all odds and against the doctors' predictions, I left my hospital bed in Mount Sinai Hospital and was able (on my own two feet!) to walk my daughter down the aisle to *chupa*.

## **BE THERE**

Another important way to be helpful is to allow the *choleh* to share his feelings and concerns with you. Try to create an atmosphere where the *choleh* feels that his conversation is really welcome. Relax your preconceived notions of what the visit should be.

You don't need to chatter constantly. Be accessible and be a good listener. Just be fully there and give the *choleh* the freedom to say what is on his mind.

## DISTRACTION OR DISCUSSION?

There is a discussion in Masechet Yoma (75a) between Rav Ami and Rav Assi about the verse in *Mishlei* (12:25): If you have anxiety in your heart, ‘*yisachena*.’ The *Ralbag* in *Mishlei* explains that one sage held that *yisachena* means that the way to deal with worry is to try to suppress the worry and attempt to forget it. The other sage opined that the way to deal with worry is by *yisachena*—to talk it out. The *choleh* will benefit from both approaches.

The first method enables the *choleh* to forget for a while where he is and what is happening to him. I was fortunate to have good friends who now and then helped me forget my situation completely. One very memorable occasion was a *Simchas Bais Hashoava* that was held in the *sukkah* at Mount Sinai Hospital. Friends brought food, music and entertainers to the hospital *sukkah*, and for those few hours I was no longer a patient in a hospital bed, but, once again, a full participant in life.

The second interpretation holds that for the *choleh* to speak with others and share his thoughts with them lightens his burden. And it isn't only direct discussion about the person's pain or illness that is effective. There are also other ways that feelings can be shared. When I was first taken to Sloan-Kettering Medical Center, a good friend went to get a *bracha* for me from Hagaon Horav Chaim Kanievsky, *Shlita*. The Rav gave a *bracha* and said that at the first sign

of any improvement in my condition, a *minyán* of people should gather together and recite the prayer of *Nishmas*.

As soon as we noticed some slight improvement, a good friend of mine came to the hospital. He said, “Simcha, give me your hand.” I could barely move most of my body, but I managed to extend the hand somewhat. He grabbed it and pulled me out of bed, and, with the help of several others, got me into a stretcher chair. They proceeded to wheel me downstairs to the chapel at Sloan-Kettering where there is a regular *minyán* for *Mincha* every day.

The *minyán* is mostly comprised of the very busy doctors who practice there. At the conclusion of *Mincha*, my friend made an announcement that we would then all now say *Nishmas* out loud together. None of the others asked why we would be saying *Nishmas* in the middle of the weekday *Mincha*, and nobody said he was in a rush. They all stayed to participate in the prayer for my situation and said *Nishmas* like never before, with huge *kavana*.

This beautiful moment shows that the idea of *yisachena* can be brought about by sharing actions together, as well as by conventional discussions. When a visitor creates lively ‘golden moments’ such as these, he can bring delight and happiness to the *choleh* that touch him to the very core.

Part of genuine sensitivity to a *Choleh’s* feelings is to know when he does not want to

talk things over. Sometimes there are good reasons for being quiet. The *Sefer Chasidim* (627) analyzes a different verse in *Mishlei* (14:10): ‘The heart knows the bitterness of the soul.’ The author asks a question: Since the heart knows its own bitterness, why say what is obvious? The verse teaches us that there are times when one should keep his pain in his heart, and not share it with others. When should that be? The *choleh* knows when his visitor is not truly concerned with his problems. If he senses that the visitor does not want to hear about his feelings, he will certainly keep them to himself. The visitor needs to be honest with himself, as well as with the *choleh*. The realities, the truths of our relationships with each other are present, even in the hospital room. A visit is only helpful if it comes from sincere caring.

## **STRENGTHENING THE CHOLEH**

As I go forward with my life, one thought gives me support as I use my experiences to help others cope with their painful circumstances. At the worst point of my illness, I was immobilized and confined to my hospital bed. I was totally dependant on nurses and aides to assist me in every detail of my personal routines. My feeling of helplessness was intensified by feelings of embarrassment and shame at needing such help. I knew then that this aspect of my life was not going to get better quickly, and that I needed to find some thought, some idea,

to help me get through it.

Then, one day, a song popped into my head and I found it to be a powerful source of encouragement and resolve. I began to sing:

אשרנו מה טוב חלקנו ומה נעים גורלנו  
ומה יפה ירושתינו

*'How fortunate are we and how good is our lot.*

*And how sweet is our portion and how beautiful is our heritage.'*

Thinking of this song gave back to me the idea that no matter where we are, and no matter what shape we are in physically, we are still something very special. We all are imbued with a soul that is a piece of Hashem and we are all created in His image.

That didn't change when I became sick, and that part of me is healthy, well and whole, and will eternally be so. ***Nobody can take that away from me—ever!*** That singular thought has sustained me through all of my trials and tribulations. It is something I try to impart to others as well. For the ***choleh*** who is at rock-bottom and in despair, being reminded that he is part of ***Hashem*** and that he is made in His image is transformative. At the end of the day, it is something that nothing and nobody can take away from him, despite his very real suffering.

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What then, have I learned about the ***mitzvah*** of



*bikur cholim* from my experience of needing it and then receiving it in such abundance? I would say that the *chesed* in the heart of the visitor makes more of an impact than he can realize. The *choleh's* life as he once knew it has been taken away from him. He is given the challenge of maintaining his completeness and his sense of self under new and trying circumstances. This self-reconstruction is a fragile process and well-wishers play a vital role in strengthening him in his struggle.

The key, after all, is that *bikur cholim* and expressing the *bracha* for *refuah shlayma* are not simply words spoken between people in a random way. The *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim*, in the context of our community's observance of the whole system of *mitzvos*, is *Hashem's* way of bringing His caring and encouragement to each *choleh*. It's more than just words. Each visit, each get-well card, each phone call and each bunch of flowers carries a message from *Hashem*. If we can learn to be just a little more thoughtful about how we express our good wishes, if we can tune in a little more accurately to the feelings of the *choleh*, perhaps *HaKaddosh Baruch Hu's* 'messages' will come through more clearly.

*I know that I have grown and learnt a great deal through this process—things that I could not have absorbed under 'normal' circumstances. All of the credit for this is due to those who came to my side during those hard times.*

*Yeyasher Kochachem.*





