

SICKNESS & THE DIVINE PRESENCE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God appeared to him in the Plains of Mamre, and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent when the day was hot. (Bereishis 18:1)

VISITING THE SICK is not where life is at. Even being around someone with something as minor as a common cold can be depressing. They feel down so they make others around them feel down, and nervous about catching a cold too. Visiting and taking care of the unwell is an obligation and simply nice thing to do, but few choose to do it by choice.

Aside from the mitzvah aspect of it, there is another positive side. A happy person is an appreciative one, and health is something too many people take for granted. At least visiting the sick allows a person to better appreciate their health without having to get sick themselves.

Nevertheless, bikur cholim—visiting the sick—is not one of those activities in life that people look forward to. But maybe they should. It may not be where life is at, but it is where the Shechinah is at:

God appeared to him: to visit the sick. Rebi Chama bar Chanina said: "It was the third day from his circumcision, and The Holy One, Blessed is He, came and inquired about his welfare." (Rashi)

You can't get much more life than that.

The Talmud explains:

One who enters [a house] to visit the sick may sit neither upon the bed nor on a seat, but must wrap himself and sit in front of him, for the Divine Presence is above an invalid's pillow . . . (Shabbos 12b)

This is interesting for a number of reasons, and instructive as well. Illness is usually considered a punishment, a form of Divine rejection. True, the Talmud says a cold is something that a person can cause him- or herself, but certainly more serious illnesses are directly from God. If God inflicts a person, why does He then support them?

Secondly, it is not easy to earn the right to have the Divine Presence dwell on a person. People used to travel for miles to go to the Bais HaMikdosh just to experience the Shechinah, and that was only during the First Temple period. The Divine Presence did not dwell on the Second Temple the same way.

Clearly though we're talking about two different kinds of experience. The Temple was a spiritually exciting place to be. Miracles occurred there regularly. Interesting activities took place hourly. The

holiness one felt there was incomparable. People looked forward to paying a visit to the Bais HaMikdosh. At the very least, it was fascinating.

This is NOT the case when visiting the sick. At the very least, visiting the sick is sobering. It reminds us of our innate physical vulnerability, of our mortality. It is not fascinating, at least not in an upbeat way. It makes us recall that life is not all fun-and-games, or even close to it.

One doctor, when asked by his patient, "Why am I sick?" answered, "Don't ask me why you're sick! Ask me why you are not sick more often, or even ALL of the time! There are a million things that can go wrong with a body at any given time, and the fact that even a few of them don't, is nothing short of an amazing gift and miracle!"

Perhaps this is the most important aspect of visiting the sick, other than helping the person who is not well. It reminds us that life is a HUGE miracle, one that we mistaken for being "natural" because of the consistency of good health.

If a person happens to need a parking space just as someone pulls out of theirs, it is Hashgochah Pratis—Divine Providence. True, people pull out of parking spaces all the time all over the world. The fact that someone did just in time for someone else to pull in, especially in a full parking lot, is Divine Providence. It certainly isn't coincidence.

A heart attack happens because something "natural" did not occur, as it is supposed to "naturally" do. A headache happens because something in the body is not doing its job well enough. How many people jump out of bed in the middle of the night in extreme pain, because of a cramp they just happened to get in their leg? Even a heart does not beat the same way each minute.

The fact that our bodies function as harmoniously as they do is a tremendous neis—miracle. The fact that they do so as consistently as they do for so many years is an even greater neis. The fact that they can so with other bodies doing the same only amplifies the miracle, especially given how much our bodies have to adapt to surrounding conditions that could easily kill a person.

The immune system itself should be enough to make a person believe in God. It's at war with all the dangerous elements of the outside world 24/7. For the most part, it fights so "quietly" that we forget we even have an immune system. It's only once a person gets sick and feels "run down" that they realize that they should take better care of themselves and strengthen their immune system.

If someone becomes terminally ill, God forbid, then it becomes clear how miraculous good health really is. It is amazing that God made the immune system flexible enough than man can work with it, take care of it, and even compensate for it is lacking. But limits remain to remind us of Who REALLY controls our health, and just how much of a miracle it really is.

This is why visiting the sick is such an eye-opener. We may be visiting someone ill but we are also "visiting" our own miraculous existence. By taking time out from "healthy" life to enter the world of "unhealthy" life, a person puts God back into their health picture, back into their life. They are re-

sensitized to the reality of God, and this results in the reality of Shechinah in their life. He was always there. In the presence of illness, they come to see it.

Thus, though God came to visit Avraham Avinu as a gesture of love and appreciation, especially for having performed Bris Milah, it was really more than that. In a sense, God did not have to come and "visit" Avraham Avinu because He was ALWAYS there with him. But, physically incapacitated, Avraham appreciated even more the gift of life and good health. It served to intensify his vision of God, and to bring him closer to his Creator.