



FROM THE VIRTUAL DESK OF THE OU VEBBE REBBE

RAV DANIEL MANN



Bikur Cholim by Electronic Means

Question: Does one fulfill the *mitzva* of *bikur cholim* by “visiting” a sick person (*choleh*) by electronic means?

Answer: It is difficult to speak definitely about “fulfilling” *bikur cholim*, as it is regarding many *mitzvot* *bein adam lachaveiro*. There is a consensus among *poskim* (many of whom we will cite, discussing phone calls) that there is moral and *mitzva* value to “visit” not in person. On the other hand, they all say that if one can come in person, he should. In order to appreciate both the value of a visit by telecommunication and the preference of in-person, we need to see the goals of *bikur cholim* and some sources on them.

One of the main of many reasons for visiting the sick (featured in the Ramban’s *Torat Ha’adam* and the Tur, Yoreh Deah 335), is to be moved by his condition and inspired to *daven* powerfully for him (Nedarim 40a). This is important enough to give cause for a *halacha* that one should visit at times of the day when his situation looks more severe, thereby increasing the

prayer’s likely intensity (ibid.; Shulchan Aruch, YD 335:4). The Rama (ibid.) says that one who visited but did not pray for the *choleh* did not fulfill the *mitzva*. Considering the importance of the *tefilla*’s quality, being there in person helps in two ways: 1. It helps one feel the *choleh*’s condition more acutely (B’er Moshe II:105). 2. The Divine Presence is found around the *choleh*’s bed (Nedarim 40a). For that reason, one who *davens* away from the *choleh* should *daven* in Hebrew, as the angels do not bring before Hashem *tefillot* from other languages (at least, Aramaic), whereas before the *choleh*, Hashem Himself accepts the *tefilla* in any language (Shulchan Aruch ibid. 5). Therefore, while we value *tefilla* for *cholim* at all times and places, when we aim for the best *tefillot* (i.e., while visiting), it is best in person (Igrot Moshe, YD I, 223; Yechaveh Da’at III:83).

Another major reason for visiting is seeing to his practical needs, including advice (Nedarim 40a). The *Minchat Yitzchak* (II:84) presumes that one can get a fuller assessment when being there. On the other hand, he posits that if one has visited in person once, he can subsequently fulfill this element of the *mitzva* by phone. Tzitz Eliezer (V, Ramat Rachel 3) suggests that this element is rarely necessary in our days when the *choleh* is getting good care and medical

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advice in a hospital. The Minchat Yitzchak (died, 1989) also foresaw that when "television technology" would develop to the point that one could speak and see the *choleh*, that would suffice.

There is a concept that someone born at the same time of year (Bava Metzia 30b) or perhaps anyone (see Rambam, Avel 14:4) may relieve some of the illness. If this is mystically based, it would presumably work only in person. Another element is psychological encouragement, which Igrot Moshe (ibid.) posits works better in person than by phone. It would seem that while audio-visual contact is stronger than telephone, it still does not compare to being in person, especially because part of the encouragement comes from knowing that the visitor made a real effort to come visit, which is obviously harder than reaching out by telecommunication.

The *gemara* discusses cases where there is more to lose than to gain from one coming in person to visit, and the Shulchan Aruch


(ibid. 8) says that one can stay outside in such cases. So one who is unable to come should not use that as an excuse to do nothing. Rather, the consensus of *poskim* is that in addition to *davening* for the *choleh*, one should "visit" electronically when appreciated. On the other hand, while we can use modern technology to help significantly in many *mitzvot*, it should not turn into a replacement for the full-fledged personal fulfillment. The following is a scenario upon which I have not seen discussion and am unable to say anything conclusive: one (especially a rabbi) has only enough time to either visit many electronically or a few in person. Which is preferable? About such cases, Kohelet says: "The eyes of the wise are in his head" (2:14). ■

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