

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted May 10, 2001 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

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BH

## VISITING THE SICK

Our mishnah comes from tractate Nedarim, i.e., "Vows", and concerns someone who has vowed not to benefit from his neighbor and how one should behave oneself when visiting that neighbor while he or she is sick.

[If] one has vowed not to benefit from his neighbor, and he went in to visit him [while he is sick] he [may] stand, but not sit. He may cure his soul, but may not cure his money [i.e., his animals].(M. Nedarim 4:4)

Sitting down would be taking advantage of something of the neighbor's, i.e., a chair. However, he may benefit his neighbor by healing him. This does not violate the vow. However, he may not cure the man's animals lest he gain some advantage from them. This mishnah is, as most mishnayot are, concrete and to the point.

The Gemara uses this mention of visiting the sick to go far beyond the mishnah's limited discussion. It even contradicts the mishnah in some ways. It takes the concrete, physical act of visiting a sick person and explores its spiritual, intellectual and psychological aspects. The passage begins with a general theological statement about visiting the sick, not just in the instance of when one has taken a vow against benefiting from his or her neighbor:

It was taught: There is no [maximum] measure for visiting the sick. What [does that phrase] "there is no measure for visiting the sick" [mean?]

Rav Yosef explained it saying: there is no limit for its reward.

Said Abaye to him: Does any mitzvah have a definite measure of reward? For we learned: Be as careful to do a light precept as to do a serious one for you do not know the reward for mitsvot? Rather, said Abaye:

Even a great person must visit a humble one.

Rava said: [One must visit] even a hundred times a day.

Said Rabbi Aha bar Hanina: Anyone who visits a sick person takes a sixtieth of his pain. Said they to him: If so, let sixty [people visit him and] restore him [to health]! He said: [The sixtieth] is as the tenth spoken of in the school of Rabbi, and [the visitor] is of his age [i.e., born at the same time as the sick person.]....

First, the Gemara teaches the merits of visiting the sick in general: its limit is without measure. But does that mean the reward is immeasurable or that the mitzvah itself should be observed with no maximum? It cannot be the former because even a small mitzvah carries a great reward. So it must mean that there is no maximum number of times one must perform this mitzvah: the more times, the better. And it is a democratic mitzvah: the great must visit the humble as well as the other way round.

Why is there such an emphasis on visiting the sick? The sick lose their role in society and become "a patient". Contact with people who will see this individual as a person is extraordinarily precious. This is true to such an extent that the Gemara goes on to state that a visitor takes a sixtieth of a sick person's pain away. (One-sixtieth is the smallest

recognizable amount of one thing in proportion to another in Judaism.) The Gemara rightly questions, then, why don't 60 people visit him until all his pain is gone? The answer is that, first, the person visiting must be of the same age as the person who is sick, so it is a true call of empathy, not merely a formality. And the person must visit even if the visitor is afraid he may catch what the sick person has. Second, each person takes away only 1/60 of what's left of the pain after the previous visitors have left so over 200 people would have to visit the person before his pain would be less than someone who just fell sick and would have that full 1/60 of pain to be taken away by a first visit.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Do you believe that visiting the sick has therapeutic value for the patient? If so, how?
2. Visiting the sick can be anxiety provoking. As with almost everything in Judaism, there is a range of possible behaviors here. If you find you cannot physically visit a sick person, how else might you fulfill this mitzvah?