

Should There be Style Points for Visiting the Sick?

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I have been treated so graciously over the past few weeks by friends who brought meals and homemade challah for Shabbat as I was recovering from back surgery. Their largesse in both time and money was astounding and I am SO grateful to them for helping me and my family as I literally get me up off my back and recover. I was astounded not just by their generosity but also by their ability to make a family's Shabbat beautiful with the love in their actions.

Naturally, I wanted to find a Talmud passage that would put into words what a great mitzvah they had done. Now, there's no problem finding the Bavli passage that talks about visiting the sick (B. Nedarim 39aff). This is a long and systematic description of how to visit the sick and what it accomplishes. There we learn that one who visits the sick takes away 1/60th of a person's illness.

Naturally, I was interested to see the corresponding passage in the Yerushalmi. So I began to search for it with no success. There is no systematic discussion of this mitzvah in the Yerushalmi; just a few snippets here and there. The sages assume people are visiting the sick, but they feel no need to formalize the etiquette on this topic. In other words, the Yerushalmi's not going to give out style points for this mitzvah. They just assume it will be done in the natural way of things.

The Yerushalmi does discuss the nature of Gemilut chassadim (deeds of kindness) as opposed to tzedakah (charity) in the opening passage of tractate Peah. Tzedakah involves helping people with money or material items. Gemilut chassadim is kindness that even the richest among us, who could never conceivably need our financial help, would still find helpful.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you feel there should be a formalized etiquette for visiting the sick ala the Bavli or would you like to do it "free style" ala the Yerushalmi? Why?
2. Can you remember a special incident when someone visited you when you were sick and it really helped? What happened?
3. Visiting the sick can be both Gemilut Chassadim and Tzedakah. Even if someone brings you nothing material, their presence can still be incredibly comforting. Have you ever done this part of "visiting the sick"? Did it help that person? What happened?

As always, looking forward to your insights and answers!