



# Learning from a LEADER

Helping to heal – things to consider when visiting the sick

BY LEONARD CARR



“RABBI GOLDFEIN OFTEN EMPHASISED THAT THE TRUE PURPOSE OF VISITING THE SICK IS TO INVESTIGATE THEIR NEEDS AND TO BE RESPONSIVE TO WHAT THEY REQUIRE.”

**MY LATE FATHER-IN-LAW, RABBI AZRIEL CHAIM Goldfein, ztzl,** in whose memory this series is dedicated, was a great spiritual teacher. He taught not only through his words but also through his actions and ways of being. I was privileged to witness his many virtuous qualities that showed both in his public and private behaviour. A very moving incident occurred in his last days, as he was lying in a hospital bed. This vignette spoke eloquently about the greatness in true goodness and humility.

A lady from Bikkur Cholim walked into the room and presented this great Rosh Yeshiva with a prayer card, a pen and a chocolate. I felt somewhat startled and bemused about how he was going to deal with this almost comically absurd situation. Here in

the bed was the teacher to whom everybody turned for guidance, comfort and counsel, faced with a well-intentioned person who had unwittingly walked into a potentially awkward situation.

True to his humility and generosity of spirit, my father-in-law responded to the lady as if he was an ordinary sick person. He told her in his warm, loving way how deeply he appreciated her kindness and concern. He went on to say how important it is for her to continue her most necessary and valuable work. He thanked her for the comfort that she had brought to him.

The Rosh Yeshiva consistently saw only the good in people. I witnessed him many times being on the receiving end of people’s seemingly unreasonable expecta-

tions, demands or self-serving agendas. He had the incredible skill of seeing people the way they most wanted to be seen. He seemed to notice only the characteristics by which they preferred to be defined. He never considered hidden agendas or insincerity on the part of others.

People just want to be loved and accepted for who they are. They may play games or put on false fronts in order to evoke love and acceptance. What I learned from my father-in-law is that when dealing with challenging people, it’s more important to be kind than to be clever. I also learned that givers give even when they are taking, and takers take even when they are giving.

Rabbi Goldfein said in a private conversation how important it is, when visiting

the sick, to be like tranquil waters and not like a tsunami. His way of being embodied those tranquil waters that refresh the spirit alluded to by King David in psalm 23. His own example began with his ubiquitous smile by which many remember him. He emphasized the importance of being upbeat when visiting the sick or comforting people. Creating a healing atmosphere requires bringing warmth, optimism and hope into the room. Strengthening a person's faith and trust in Hashem is the most important thing you can offer. It has a direct effect on helping them to heal. With a clear purpose in mind, you can bring true healing.

It's vitally important while visiting the sick to have conversations that offer encouragement and bring positivity into the room. In order to do this, you have to truly be present. You have to have a mind that is open and receptive. You need to adopt the approach of a good host in order to be attentive and accurately sense what is really important and truly valuable to the other. This means, for example, tuning in to whether the sick person even wants to speak to you and allowing them to discuss what's on their mind.

In order to be truly helpful, it is important to be honest and clear about your intentions. Your intention should be to help the sick person to heal, or to assist the family and other people who are supporting the patient. Providing a healing presence to someone requires great sensitivity and insight. Many people visit for essentially selfish motives. An example would be visiting out of duty or to appear to have done the right thing among friends or family. Some act out of a compulsion to see the sick person in order to get reassurance to calm their own anxiety. Others may simply need to be seen so as to reaffirm their own sense of importance. When you visit prompted by your own needs, you may behave in ways during the visit that are actually counterproductive to the healing of the ill person.

It's detrimental to scare someone who

is ill by giving them the impression that you are fearful because you arrive with an air of panic or hysteria. Even if you are coming to grips with the possible loss, it's the worst thing to look as if you are already in mourning. People sitting at the hospital bed having conversations over the patient as if the person isn't there is degrading and hurtful. Talking about other people's illnesses and deaths and other horror stories discourage and depress a sick person. It's important to respect the privacy of a person who might be embarrassed about his/her condition or physical appearance. A person may have a benign condition, but because of his/her public position, might find it demeaning to be seen in bed. Staying too long and tiring out the sick person is destructive, as the most important thing s/he needs is rest. It's also important not to discuss the person's 'prognosis'. Family politics and conflict in front of the patient is certain to exacerbate conditions and impede or even prevent healing.

Rabbi Goldfein often emphasized the true purpose of visiting the sick is to investigate their needs and to be responsive to what they require. Your research should start with ascertaining the circumstances of the patient. Firstly, consider the nature of the illness. Sometimes people feel exposed or embarrassed about their illnesses and find visits intrusive and stressful. Your relationship with the person will be a major factor in knowing whether a visit from you would be welcome. Gender may also play a role in this decision. Know who else is visiting the person. Crowds of people, frenetic activity and compulsive chatter outside the room or around the bedside can strain the sick person and drain their valuable energy. Often, not visiting and keeping out of the family's way is a greater kindness than visiting.

The timing of your visit is very important. Appropriate timing depends on a realistic assessment of your relative closeness or importance in the sick person's

life, regardless of how you happen to feel. On arrival for a visit, you should gently try to establish what immediate needs the person has. For example, the person may need grooming or practical physical care. They might appreciate music or literature or some form of stimulation to keep them occupied between visits.

Supporting the caretakers whose resources are stretched may be the most impactful and useful form of support. Offering behind-the-scenes support by taking care of other aspects of the person's life may be what the person most needs for peace of mind. Feeding their pets, watering plants, collecting post, taking care of administrative issues are examples of supportive actions that may give more help and reassurance to the patient.

After taking care of the physical aspects, it's important to gently and tactfully enquire if there is anything that's worrying the person. The next challenge is determining when you have done what is helpful and when is the appropriate time to leave.

If you are visiting someone who is vulnerable, like an old person who might be alone or someone with a chronic illness, know that hospital staff often take more seriously a person who has social and family support. Vulnerable people are often not given a voice if they do not have others advocating for them. Sometimes in the hustle and bustle of hospital routines they can be neglected or forgotten. It's equally important not to frustrate or alienate the hospital staff by disobeying rules or being demanding, because the patient may pay the price when you leave.

Sickness and loss make people feel incomplete. The only way to restore wholeness is to connect deeply with and realign with ultimate shalom, which is Hashem. By connecting with our feelings of helplessness, inadequacy, fear and lack of control, we can deepen our awareness and reinforce our selves of our total dependency on Hashem. Through that awareness we can cry out to Him from the depths of our being and in so doing bring His presence and power more closely into our lives, and through that, derive healing and comfort. ■

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