

Aggadot (Narrative tales) on the mitzvah of Visiting the Sick from the Talmud Brachot 5b

Rabbi Hiyya b. Abba fell ill and Rabbi Yohanan went in to visit him. He said to him: Are your sufferings welcome to you? He replied: Neither they nor their reward. He said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he raised him.

Are your sufferings welcome? A strange question. But Rabbi Yohanan is suggesting a theology of suffering that suggests one who is a good person but suffers in this world, suffers out of God's love and concern for that person. The punishment for whatever transgressions committed are meted out in this temporary world, so that the sufferer will enter the next world free of recompense. But the Sages in telling this story offer a very human image of the Sage Rabbi Hiyya. He says in effect, "I am in pain. Don't talk to me about theology". Rabbi Yohanan's response teaches us that to properly observe the mitzvah of bikur holim, neither words, nor lessons, nor theological insights are necessary. It is just enough to be there and perhaps just hold the person's hand to "raise up" their spirits.

Rabbi Yohanan once fell ill and Rabbi Hanina went in to visit him. He said to him: Are your sufferings welcome to you? He replied: Neither they nor their reward. He said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand and he raised him. Why could not Rabbi Yohanan raise himself? — They replied: The prisoner cannot free himself from jail.

In the following story, the tables are reversed. It is Rabbi Yohanan who is ill and it is Rabbi Hanina who dismisses theological solutions to his suffering. The unique aspect here is the Talmud's question: Why couldn't Rabbi Yohanan heal himself, if he was able to heal Rabbi Hiyya? The answer is that even healers need others to help them. Never think that because you may not be a doctor or nurse or other healing professional that you can't perform an important act of healing.

Rabbi Eleazar fell ill and Rabbi Yohanan went in to visit him. He noticed that he was lying in a dark room and he (Rabbi Yohanan) bared his arm and light radiated from it. He noticed that Rabbi Eleazar was weeping, and he said to him: Why do you weep? Is it because you did not study enough Torah? But we have learned that one who sacrifices much and one who sacrifices little have the same merit, provided that the heart is directed to heaven. Is it perhaps lack of sustenance? Not everybody has the privilege to enjoy two tables (the table of wealth and the table of scholarship). Is it perhaps because of [the lack of] children? This is the bone of my tenth son! He replied to him: I am weeping on account of this beauty that is going to rot in the earth. He said to him: On that account you surely have a reason to weep. And they both wept. In the meanwhile he said to him: Are your sufferings welcome to you? — He replied: Neither they nor their reward. He said to him: Give me your hand, and he gave him his hand and he raised him (back to health).

This story is complex and rich and suggests that Rabbi Yohanan may have had certain supernatural powers. But let me focus on the conclusion, on the weeping. Rabbi Yohanan was known to be a very handsome man. But it seems hard to believe that Rabbi Eleazar was only commenting on Rabbi Yohanan's physiognomic blessings. Rather to me it is a general existential concern that Rabbi Eleazar shares with Rabbi Yohanan. Even the most lovely things in this world wither and die. This realization causes the two men to weep together. It is the human condition and we cannot escape it. As for bikur holim, what I think it teaches is that it is Ok to cry with the patient if that is where they are at. Just the presence of another sympathetic person can be comforting and in the end Rabbi Yohanan, just by being with Rabbi Eleazar in that moment, assists him in healing.