

“The Patient as Person: Making a Difference in an Uncertain World”

Do we all, in some way, not want to make a difference in this world. How do we define making a difference? Is it through the work we do in our careers? Is it through the impact we have with our families? The answer to all these is yes. We make a difference by improving the quality of life in these realms and through other channels. Now that most of us are retired and have our health and plenty of energy and time to give of ourselves, we have the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of not only those we know but even with people we have never met before.

We are making a difference right now as we show up to service and form a minyan so that someone like ourselves can recite kaddish. When we go into the hospital, for example, and visit a fellow member of the congregation, we are making a huge difference for that person. Anyone who gives the time to visit the sick and comfort the bereaved or just to make the phone call in following up on a friend, for example, recently recuperating from surgery restores something sacred inside us.

Our congregation is all about service above self. Congregation Beth Yam has a Caring Committee that reaches out to our congregants in the hospital. The individuals who visit the sick perform an ancient mitzvah. Their intent fits into the same spirit that the Torah portion discusses this week. In parasha Teruma the people give, each from their hearts, to the fund to create the Tabernacle, the portable worship and sacrificial sanctuary, that followed the Israelites into their desert wanderings and ultimately into the Promised Land towards Jerusalem.

Giving from the heart whether it comes from our material resources or our volunteer time to visit the sick individual ultimately originates from a common source. What is it? Furthermore how can we tap into it today particularly in a time when so much instability persists in American life? The answer to the first question is that Judaism calls us to create and preserve the community through terumah, a freewill gift of our time and our souls. Judaism also calls us to help the patient retain their humanness when they are in the hospital. The second question challenges us to recognize that helping one person is tantamount to saving an entire world. There is a lot in the world that distracts us from keeping our hands on the pulse of preserving a compassionate society. The Judaic ethos revolves around seeing the interconnectedness of all the people in a hospital from doctors to volunteers who bring healing to the patient. We need to slow down and focus on people and not view them as just tasks on a to do list.

Point one

Our tradition contains laws regarding visiting the sick and what one should do and what kinds of things one should not do in front of a patient in the hospital. The laws guides us about praying, when to visit the person after they have been hospitalized, why a rich person should be make sure to visit a poor one. In fact, the tradition teaches that each visit to a sick person takes away a

sixth of their pain. At the very core of the value to visit the sick is the belief that since God visited the sick (Abraham when we was recuperating from his circumcision) so too are we obligated to perform this mitzvah. Also at the very core of the Jewish view of visiting the patient is enable them to retain their humanity.

In the morning service of the prayerbook we read, “These are the obligations that a person performs in this world but reaps the reward in the world to come”: ‘Visiting the sick, taking care of bride and the deceased, praying and knowing that study is the pathway to achieve all these mitzvot.’ It is not easy to perform a mitzvah like visiting the sick especially for someone we do not know. People have mixed feelings about being in hospitals. But those values overcome that understandable hesitation because when we perform this mitzvah, we are doing what feels right inside. Jewish texts affirm this and that is how we build the community of caregivers. Visiting a patient or bikur holim affirm that the real reward is not the world to come but the satisfaction of doing a mitzvah in this world.

Our caring committee, under the leadership of Lynne Schmidt, makes the call and drive over to the hospital, walk into the room and visit. Most times they receive appreciation from the patient. Yet sometimes they do encounter people not at their best state of mind. This is another reason they deserve our admiration. They know that no one wants to feel forgotten. And the truth is that being a patient in a hospital not only is traumatic but it can be terribly boring. Just a friendly face and a few minutes of conversation makes a difference to the patient more than we, the visitor, can appreciate. To do this kind of mitzvah requires a degree of selflessness.

This mitzvah is also about building the spiritual community inside a temple. Visiting the sick is another one of those prophetic values, like protecting the orphan or the widow or the poor person, that determines whether or not we as community are worthy of Divine consideration. When we show that people matter and help the patient know that then we have succeeded in our mission.

Today we are so busy, retired or not, in our daily routines. When do we consider whether or not our actions are making a difference someone else’s life let alone in God’s view of us? How can we stop and slow down to be in touch with those need that extra encouragement or good word from us? We have so many ways of communicating. Cell phones and texting, email and computers are all means of bringing us closer together. But networking on a daily basis is not the same as seeing someone-eye to eye. To take the time and talk to someone or to listen is becoming more of a lost art in a world that values sound bite conversations. You don’t have to be a therapist to reach into someone, looking down upon them in their hospital bed and ask them, “How are you today?” And it’s ok to let silence take over for a minute until the individual answers. In that silence is holiness. A visit is worthwhile if a patient can express what is in their hearts at that moment of time. When we arrive, we represent the world that cares about that

person and reminds them that they are not alone. What higher calling can we respond to than to help another person feel that the world or their community has not forgotten them?

We are living in a world that is hanging on by a thread for its economic survival. How does that impact our thinking, our values and our priorities in caring about the next person? People are thinking a lot about how they can survive but at what cost? Who slips through the cracks of human decency? When the rabbis of the Talmud said, ‘saving one life is like saving an entire world,’ they meant that we should never minimize what we can do to make a difference for someone else. So we need to make an extra effort today to maintain the humanity that seems to vanish like smoke on the water when people and families are hurting.

We know from time eternal that visiting a sick person improves the spiritual and mental well being and can make a difference in the ability of a patient to heal. We also know that when that patient will not get better, our presence in a hospital room is no less important. Helping a dying person hold onto their humanity is a profound mitzvah. Is this a blessing we take for granted every day?

Some of the most profound spiritual moments I have experienced in my life are when I have sat down with a patient either in the hospital or at care facility and just talked. I felt that I had been the one who was visited. I learned and witnessed more wisdom in a forty minute visit than in hours of reading a religious text. I suppose it is about viewing the patient as a person first and patient second that opens the doors to a holy encounter.

One of the most important influences upon me was Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel. In an essay he wrote called the patient as person, Dr Heschel asked, “What is human about a human being? – Personhood is about the ability to be concerned for other human beings. Animals are concerned for their own instinctive needs; the degree of our being human stands in direct proportion to the degree in which we care for others. The word cure comes from the word care.

“The truth of being human is gratitude Without a sense of significant being, a sense of wonder and mystery, a sense of reverence for the sanctity of being alive, the doctor’s efforts and prescriptions may prove futile.” Dr. Heschel was trying to teach us that our role in visiting a patient is to help that person retain their humanness in a time of their lives when they very much need affirmation of being unique and special.

The humanity of all the players in a hospital environment contribute to the humanity quotient, the physician, the social worker, the nurses, the volunteers and technicians. They all have a role to play, like the temple visitors, in creating an environment that provides comfort and respect for the individuality of each patient. That is holy work.