

Bikur Cholim - A Real Life-Saver

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We learn the mitzva of BIKUR CHOLIM from G-d's visit to Avraham after his illness from his Brit Mila. Thus, the Sefer Mitzvot Katan 47 counts BIKUR CHOLIM as one of the 613 Mitzvot, citing the verse "You shall walk in HIS ways." (D'varim 28:9)

However, Rambam in Hilchot Evel 14 states that all specific acts of CHESED, such as comforting mourners, BIKUR CHOLIM and hosting guests are not Torah Mitzvot, but rather Rabbinic Mitzvot. But then he adds that these Chesed Mitzvot are also under the general Torah Mitzva of "Love your friend as yourself." (Vayikra 19:18) Thus, according to Rambam, BIKUR CHOLIM is actually a TWO-FOR-ONE. A Rabbinic Mitzva and a Torah Mitzva, or as I call it, a TWO-FER.

Are non-Jews also obligated in the Mitzva of BIKUR CHOLIM? The Talmud in Nedarim 40 relates that a student of Rabbi Akiva became very ill. No one visited the student until Rabbi Akiva himself visited and personally attended to his needs. When Rabbi Akiva left, his student called out, "Rebbe, you have saved my life." Rabbi Akive then stated, "Anyone who does not visit the sick, is equal to a murderer!"

This declaration of Rabbi Akiva is codified by Rambam (Hilchot Evel 14:4). "BIKUR CHOLIM is a Mitzva that is obligatory to ALL. Even people of higher stature are required to visit people of lower stature. Numerous visits daily should be made to the sick person, as long as this does not inconvenience the patient. Whoever visits the sick is considered to have taken away part of the illness, and whoever does not visit the sick is equal to a murderer."

Since the prohibition of murder is one of the Seven Noahide Mitzvot, perhaps any requirement based on an extension of the Mitzva not to murder, such as formulated by Rambam, is also obligatory upon non-Jews as well. Food for thought. The Rambam does not engage in hyperbole, therefore according to Rambam, when we do BIKUR CHOLIM we are actually engaged in saving the person's life. 