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Rabbi Robert Pilavin

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**Visiting the Sick and Comforting the Mourner**

The laws of *bikkur cholim* - visiting the sick - occupy only one chapter of the code of Jewish law. We are told who may visit the sick and at what point he may visit. We are told how often he may visit, and when during the day that visit should be paid. We are told where to sit when we visit and how to pray for the sick.

The chapter ends with the observation that "*nichum aveilim kodeim l'vikkur cholim*" - comforting mourners takes precedence over visiting the sick."

At first blush, this seems to fly in the face of common sense. Visiting the sick is preventive; comforting mourners applies only after the worst has happened. Isn't an ounce of prevention worth a pound of cure?

According to our tradition, if we are forced to choose between the two, the mitzvah of consoling mourners takes precedence over visiting the sick, because consoling mourners is an act of kindness to both the living and the dead. It's a sentiment with which we are familiar, if only because of the book of Ruth.

Ruth, we may recall, is the daughter-in-law par excellence. She is loyal to Naomi even after widowhood has dissolved the familial ties that bound them. When Ruth follows her mother-in-law back to the land of Israel, Naomi exclaims, "May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me." (1:8)

In moral mathematics, we prefer a kindness that keeps faith with both the dead and the living.

As we prepare to recite Yizkor on the second day of Shavuot, we should keep in mind this simple but profound truth. If we show kindness only to those who are still with us, we are ignoring our roots. We are forgetting the source of everything we hold dear. But if we reserve our kindness only for those who have passed on, we have allowed our memories to paralyze us. Our loved ones would not have wanted us to ignore the needs of others as a tribute to their memory. They would take greater comfort in knowing that they inspired their loved ones to push forward, to associate their memory with worthy undertakings.

*Chag Same'ach!*

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*Rabbi Pilavin is rabbi of Congregation Sons of Israel in Manalapan, New Jersey.*

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