

FOR CLASS #3

Bikur Cholim: The beginning of the death process

(Hebrew: ביקור חולים; "visiting the sick, refers to the mitzvah (Jewish religious commandment) to visit and extend aid to the sick.^[1] It is considered an aspect of *gemilut chasadim* (benevolence, selflessness, loving-kindness).^[2] It is traditional to recite prayers for healing, such as the *Mi Shebeirach* prayer in the synagogue, and Psalms (especially Psalm 119) on behalf of the sick.^[3] *Bikur cholim* societies exist in Jewish communities around the world. The earliest *Bikur cholim* society on record dates back to the Middle Ages.

The roots of *Bikur cholim* can be traced back to the Torah, when God visits Abraham after his circumcision (Genesis 18:1).

Bikur cholim is mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud several times, in Tractate Nedarim 39a, 39b, and 40a. Nedarim 39a and 39b state that "[One must visit] even a hundred times a day" and that "He who visits a person who is ill takes away a sixtieth of his pain." Nedarim 40a says that "anyone who visits the sick causes him to live and anyone who does not visit the sick causes him to die"; it also states that those who visit the sick are spared from the punishments of Gehenna (explain) and that God sustains the sick, citing the Book of Psalms Chapter 31.^[5] According to the Talmud, visits should not be very early or late in the day, and one should not stay too long. Relatives and friends are urged to visit as soon as possible. It is advised that a sick person not be informed of the death of a relative or friend lest it cause more pain.^{[3][6]}

Visiting the sick during Shabbat, often after morning services, is a common practice; the House of Shammai opposed this but the House of Hillel viewed this as a mitzvah and the view of Hillel became part of halakha. Additionally, is also permissible to travel on Shabbat if a close relative falls ill.^[3]