



**Visits During Illness:
Torah Reflections on *Parashat Va-yera***

Genesis 18:1 – 22:24

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Have you even been in home or in a hospital room and had the feeling that there was something so precious—even holy—about a visit during a time of illness or loss? What made it so?

This week's Torah portion begins in the wake of the Bible's second recorded surgery—and the first one by human hands. The passage opens with Abraham, sitting at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day, while recovering from his adult circumcision. Tradition has it that God models for us the *mitzvah* of *bikkur holim*, visiting the sick, by appearing to Abraham during this time.

A traditional interpretation also sees the three men who visit Abraham and Sarah that day as emissaries from God—even angels in the guise of humans.

In the Biblical narrative, the interaction between Abraham and his visitors is both rich and complex. Ostensibly they are coming to visit him, to bring a measure of comfort and healing, to be bearers of good news. And yet note what happens: Abraham has for years been such the caregiver and host that he can't help but arise—while still in pain—to greet and welcome and feed his guests. They, in turn, accept his hospitality, while trying to minimize the burden of their visit.

How many of us also feel that pull, wanting to give or at least put on a good face for someone who has come to visit or help; to not be a burden? How strong is that drive to turn aside from our pain and vulnerability with others! How precious is that longing—even when those efforts come with a cost. And how challenging when we must simply accept the help of others without responding in kind in that moment or welcoming the visitors as we might like.

Indeed almost any visit has a degree of give and take, even if one party is in that moment frail or compromised in profound ways while the other appears relatively healthy and strong and self-assured. Visitors and visitees, the healthy and the infirm, move toward or away from one another in so many ways—sometimes navigating a myriad of subtle cues and judgments and hampered communications; sometimes with small steps and sometimes with loud pronouncements; sometimes with a clear task or sense of mission, sometimes with a gracious sense of understanding, sometimes with confusion, sometimes all the above. Awkwardness may be felt by either party; and likewise a sense of gratitude or blessing.

Genesis 18 includes an account of Abraham arguing with God (about the fate of Sodom); and ends with an image of God departing from the visit and Abraham returning “to his place”.

During our experiences of illness, and sharing visits during illness, there may be times of struggle and argument and frustration—even while healing is taking place—in addition to the comfort and sense of connection for which we hope. Our time with others may just as easily be mundane and familiar, or life-changing. In times of solitude we may feel more isolated from daily events and family news – or more acutely aware and moved by them.

When we are facing illness in our own lives, or considering reaching out to others, we may do well to reflect on what we wish to bring to our encounters; what we are actually able to do; and what we need. Our openness to those questions may translate into a different kind of give and take. And then when the visit is over we might find we, like Abraham, have been helped to return, enriched, to our place.

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