

# Gemilut Hesed

## Acts of Loving Kindness

### On the Primacy of *Gemilut Hesed* as a Jewish Value

#### STUDY TEXTS

##### ***Pirkei Avot 1:2***

Shimon Ha Tzaddik was one of the last members of the Great Assembly. This was a favorite teaching of his:

The world rests on three things: on Torah, on service of God, on acts of loving kindness.

##### ***B Talmud, Sukkot 49b***

Our rabbis taught: gemilut hesed (loving-kindness) is greater than charity in three ways:

1. Charity is done with one's money, while loving-kindness may be done with one's money or with one's peers [e.g. spending time with a sick person].
2. Charity is given only to the poor, while loving-kindness may be given to the poor and to the rich [e.g. consoling one who is in mourning or depress].
3. Charity is given only to the living, while loving-kindness may be shown to both the living and the dead [e.g. by arranging a proper burial for a person who died indigent].

##### ***B Talmud, Shabbat 31a***

Once there was a pagan who came before Shammai, and said to him: "Convert me on the condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot." Shammai pushed him aside with the measuring stick he was holding. The same fellow came before Hillel, and Hillel converted him, saying: "That which is despicable to you, do not do to your fellow, this is the whole Torah, and the rest is commentary, go and learn it."

##### **Maimonides: *Hilchot Deot*--Laws of Counsel**

It is a mitzvah for every human to love each and everyone from Israel as he loves his own body. As it is written, "be loving to your neighbor (as one) like yourself," therefore one must sing his praises, and show concern for his financial well-being, as he would for his own well-being and as he would for his own honor. Anyone who aggrandizes himself at the expense of another person has no portion in the world to come.

## Guidelines for Performing the Mitzvot of *Gemilut Hesed*

How might you individually or together with members of your sisterhoods use these materials? Consider the following:

- Establish or recharge a *Bikkur Cholim* committee to visit the sick
- Prepare *se'udot havra'ah* – mourner's meal after a funeral – for members of your community
- Make your synagogue accessible for people with disabilities
- Arrange for members of your sisterhood to help out in local hospitals on Christmas and Easter
- Establish a driving pool to help elderly and infirm members of your sisterhood to go shopping, for physician appointments, or just for a fun afternoon out.
- Support educational programs for children with special needs in your synagogue's Hebrew school
- Establish a *chevra kaddishah* (a sacred burial society) in your synagogue

In addition to these activities as life-affirming mitzvot, organizing and maintaining a group of women who are committed to *gemilut hesed* is remarkably effective in re-building those caring communities that have been disappearing with each generation. In strengthening our communities we are reinforcing the sacred ideal of *kol Yisrael arevim zeh lazeh* – *all of Israel is responsible for each other*.

## Practical Guide to Comforting the Distressed or Ill

### **Mitzvah: *Bikkur holim* (visiting the sick)**

**Leader:** *In times of tragedy or distress, friends need each other. You may wonder, 'What should I say?' 'What can I do?'*

Sit with your friend. Sometimes the simple act of sitting in close proximity can be comforting. Your role is to bear witness to your friend's pain, not to offer magic words to take it away. Try not to worry about saying the wrong thing. Keep it simple, sister.

Walk with your friend. The stress of trauma or grief can be physically debilitating. Take your friend by the hand and walk, if possible. Breathe together. Again, no words are necessary. Your closeness is a comfort.

You are there for your friend. Don't talk about your own physical ailments and concerns.

Validate your friend's feelings and worries. At the same time, reflect optimism and hope for her recovery.

Try to make her laugh.

Attend to the physical needs of your friend. When distressed, people often forget to eat and drink. Dehydration can make anyone ill or weak and will diminish the ability to cope.

Make a meal. Along with forgetting to drink, your friend needs to eat. Home-cooked meals are particularly welcome – much more so than prepared foods that are often very grease and salt-laden.

Know when to get help. If your friend is unable to drink, eat or sleep and you are concerned about her health, encourage her to call the doctor. Medical attention may be necessary.

Stay for the long haul. Many people offer help at the time of crisis. A true friend still comes by one month, six months, or a year later. Be supportive for as long as you are needed.

### **Activity:**

Share stories of good comments and bad comments that you have either experienced or heard about. There are many, and we can learn from past successes and failures.

# A Guide to Hospital Visits

## **Mitzvah: *Bikkur Holim***

Follow hospital rules. Remember that hospitals have rules that are developed to best serve the patients.

Wash you hands. Before you approach a patient, wash your hands thoroughly. The patient does not need outside germs.

Don't visit if you are sick or if you have been exposed to someone who is sick. You could jeopardize the patient's recuperation.

Don't wear perfume. Often people who are ill are even more sensitive to strong smells (which could linger long after you have left the room).

Clear all food you bring the patient with his/her physician or nurse. Even if the patient has a craving, it may not be good to indulge him/her.

Don't stay too long. Decide how long to stay before you arrive. Provide support, but don't tire the patient out. If this is a simple well-wishing visit, stay only a few minutes, especially if there are closer friends or family members there.

Don't sit on the bed.

If you bring a gift, be sure it is appropriate. Find out if the person is allergic to flowers. Don't take very heavy (in weight) books – paperbacks are better.

Don't try to "one up" the patient. Be sympathetic and validate how hard it is to be sick.

If a medical care provider comes in, excuse yourself and wait in the hall unless you are explicitly asked to stay. Don't ask: "Should I leave?" Just do it.

Respect patient confidentiality.

Wash your own hands after leaving. Hospitals have germs, too.

### **Friendship Improves Health**

In the late 1980s, epidemiologist James House, Ph.D., reviewed studies regarding friendship and health involving more than 22,000 men and women. He found that people with well-established support systems had far longer life spans than those without such support. People with few friends and little supports had a death rate two to four times that of people with strong support systems. Friendship matters. When your friends are sick they need you the most.

# Pikuach Nefesh--First Aid

## Mitzvah: *Pikuach nefesh*

*Do not stand by idly when a human life is in danger (Leviticus 19:16)*

### Long-range sisterhood activities

- Arrange for CPR and First Aid courses at you synagogue
- Arrange to participate in local blood drives
- Arrange to participate in bone marrow donor drives

### Post on the bulletin board

#### **18 (Chai) Simple First Aid Steps**

1. Familiarize yourself with basic rules of first-aid, including burns and bleeding.
2. Keep a thermometer, aspirin and first-aid cream in your desk drawer at work.
3. Offer to pick up prescriptions for someone who can't get out of the house.
4. Be sensitive to those with allergies. Keep your pets in a different room when you have guests with allergies.
5. Keep a few bandages, tissues and sun block in your purse at all times.
6. Grow an aloe plant and keep it handy in case of accidents.
7. Make emergency contact cards for all members of your family.
8. Keep a first-aid kit in your car.
9. Accompany a friend on visits to the ophthalmologists – remember how difficult it is to function with dilated pupils.
10. Learn how to do a deer-tick check for friends and family who walk in the woods.
11. Carry emergency ambulance and fire department numbers in your purse.
12. Donate crutches and canes that you no longer need to hospitals and rehab centers.
13. Post poison hotline numbers at the office and home.
14. Wait hand-on-foot for a sick friend; she'll return the favor when you're sick (and if not, it's even a bigger mitzvah!)
15. Keep ice packs in your freezer
16. Drive elderly friends and family to health appointments
17. Volunteer as the office fire captain; ensure that fire extinguishers are readily available
18. Remember that expressions of concern and also humor are powerful first aid tools.

# Gemilut Hessed: Being a Mensch

## Random Acts of Kindness

### Mitzvah: Helping Others

#### TEXTS:

*When you see the beast of your neighbor lying under its burden and would refrain from raising it, you must nevertheless raise it with him. (Exodus 23:5)*

*If you see your neighbor's beast fallen on the road...you must help him raise it. (Deuteronomy 22:4)*

*You must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers... (Deuteronomy 10:19)*

Offer help or directions to people who look lost. Often they are too embarrassed to ask.

Offer to carry groceries to the car of the elderly or disabled person at the grocery store.

Leave generous tips for good service; service workers are paid very little.

Volunteer at a homeless shelter.

Feed a parking meter about to expire.

Say "bless you" or "gesundheit" when strangers sneeze.

Hold the door open for the person behind you.

If you are tall, offer to retrieve things off high store shelves for short people.

Give up your seat to a family with young children, the elderly, or the disabled.

Be patient. This is useful when standing in long lines.

Volunteer to read at day care centers, rehab facilities, or schools.

Be a courteous driver, allowing others to merge in front of you or for pedestrians to cross the street before you proceed through an intersection.

Offer to share your umbrella with someone in the rain.

Clear your table of trash in fast-food restaurants and coffee shops with no wait staff.

Allow someone with only a few items to go before you in line at the grocery store, especially if your cart is full.

If someone's bag is open and her wallet is visible, let her know about it.

Make a serious effort to return any lost items you may find.

Smile often. People usually respond in kind.

Thank people often.

#### Activity:

*What can we add to this list?*

