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**Bikur Cholim Manual**

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May we always be inspired  
to serve the Divine and God's creatures.  
May life nourish our capacity for compassion and for joy.  
May we always have what we need to continue  
to make ourselves a blessing to others:  
and may the holiness of our work be  
an ongoing source  
of blessing in our own lives

Rabbi Amy Eilberg

Dear Volunteer,

Thank you all for being a part of our Caring Community at Temple Beth Elohim. Most importantly, we thank you for being a part of our Bikur Cholim committee.

The Hebrew translation for “Bikur Cholim” is visiting the ill. As volunteers of the Bikur Cholim/illness committee, we are involved in other caring acts as well. We provide a unique connection between our congregation and the congregant in need. This is done by not only making personal visits, but also by making phone calls, delivering TLC bags or one of our beautiful healing shawls, by helping to coordinate meals or other support services and when needed, with follow-up phone calls or visits.

It is written that “one of the most important obligations in Jewish life is to imitate God and provide care, concern, and compassion for those who are ill”. This obligation is one we hope to try and achieve as volunteers of the TBE Bikur Cholim committee.

Over the last several years, many of you have asked for the listing of specific tasks suggested for use by our volunteers. In response to this, we have organized the Bikur Cholim manual. It is our hope that it will answer your questions and make your role as a volunteer more comfortable.

Please know that these are simply suggestions, and you must respond to the congregant in a way that is most comfortable for you. We are always here to provide support whenever it is needed.

You are doing such important and meaningful work, and we thank you for being part of this wonderful committee.

Andrea Fein and Sandy Goldstein  
Bikur Cholim Co-Chairs

## **Bikur Cholim (Illness Team)**

The Bikur Cholim Team is composed of volunteers who, in collaboration with the clergy, provide support for congregants who are experiencing illness in their lives.

### **1. Organization:**

- a. **Team Leaders:** The Bikur Cholim Team is headed by two team leaders who take responsibility for organizing the volunteers, overseeing all aspects of the program and are the principal contact with the clergy.
- b. **Volunteers:** Designated volunteers take responsibility for each month. During their assigned month the volunteers are contacted by the team leader or the Cantor when the services of the team are needed.

### **2. Role of the Volunteer:**

- a. **Initial Contact with Ill Congregant:** The volunteer calls the ill or healing congregant and expresses concern on behalf of the congregation. The volunteers ask how the congregant is doing/healing and if they have any specific needs. Most often the families are touched by the phone call and need little or no assistance. On rare occasions assistance has been given in arranging for meals and providing ongoing contact with the Caring Community. We try to assess if the congregant has a support network of family and friends to help them through this difficult time. We also tell the congregant about our healing service and encourage them to attend. If they seem interested, we ask if Jane Brown can contact them directly. At times, we ask if a congregant might like to speak with another congregant who has experienced the same illness to help them gain a broader perspective on coping and healing.\*\*\* This is done through Match Makers and Jane Brown is the contact person for this. We also ask if they would like their name mentioned during Mi Shebeirach or their names listed in the Shabbat flyer.  
The volunteer delivers a TLC bag (described below) to the congregant.
- b. **Temple Loving Care Bags (TLC Bags):** A short while after the initial phone call the volunteer delivers a TLC bag to the congregant. The bag contains a temple mug filled with tea and candy, a CD of healing melodies, Shabbat candles and a quart of

homemade chicken soup (“Jewish Penicillin”). The **TLC Bag** has two purposes: first to let the congregant know that the congregation is thinking of them during this difficult time and second to give the volunteer a reason to visit. Bags are located in the caring community room closet.

- c. **Honey for a Sweet Year:** Volunteers deliver a small jar of honey to all who have dealt with a serious health issue during the past year at Rosh Hashanah. The card attached wishes them a sweet New Year.
  
- d. **Maintain Written Records:** At the end of each month we ask each volunteer to send us a list of members they contacted, when, and what was done. In several cases, depending on the illness, the Caring Community is needed to follow a congregant for extended periods of time. Special arrangements are then made in those cases.

### 3. **Resources:**

- a. **Temple Library:** The temple library has books available to congregants and their families on wellness and support.
  
- b. **JFCS and the URJ:** These organizations offer several small booklets and articles that may be useful to specific congregants

## **Bikur Cholim Volunteer Roadmap**

1. Bikur Cholim co-chairs will remind you at the beginning of the month of your assignment
2. When the need arises, clergy will contact either Susan or Sandy to let them know of a congregant that should be contacted.
3. Program coordinators will contact you as the monthly volunteer and give you as much information about the congregant's situation as they can.
4. Then please soon after we contact you, make a telephone call using the checklist given you. At that time it is important to ascertain the congregant's needs: do they have a strong support system in family and friends? Will they need more support from the TBE community? What are their needs while they are ill and/or recuperating?
5. Arrange a visit to drop off the TLC bag. Many recipients enjoy the company as well...some will just take the bag and say "thank you".
6. Temple Loving Care (TLC) bags are kept in the closet in the caring community room closet. Make sure you get an illness bag (not bereavement!). There are some blank cards on the shelf. Please take one and fill it out to put in the bag for delivery signing it "from the caring community and the clergy". Then go into the Temple kitchen and on the double door refrigerator get a container of frozen chicken soup ("Jewish Penicillin") from the freezer door.
7. Follow up with a phone call in about two weeks to see how they are progressing and if they are in need of other services.
8. At the end of the month, we ask that you send Sandy a monthly report recounting who you contacted and what was done. This will hopefully enable us to keep better track.

Thank you so very much.

## Bikur Cholim Initial Call Checklist

Goal: To provide support for our congregants who are coping with illness or issues of continuing care.

After a member of our clergy has spoken with an ill congregant and has assessed that a volunteer call is appropriate, the volunteer is contacted. The following is the volunteer's checklist.

- Acknowledge your awareness of their situation and offer consolation and support from the Temple community. At that time it is important to ascertain their needs: do they have a strong support system with family and friends? Will they need more support from the TBE community? What are their needs while they are ill and/or recuperating?
- Offer what we can do:
  - Arrange to deliver a "TLC" (Temple Loving Care) bag to the home, always calling first. *Bags are kept in the caring community room closet; frozen chicken containers are on the freezer door in the TBE small kitchen. Some cards are in the bags. if you need a blank card to fill in, they are on the TLC bag shelf. Please sign "from the Caring Community and the Clergy"*
  - Ask if they would like a Mi Shebeirach said at services for them or their name listed in the Shabbat flyer
  - Ask if they are comfortable with our sharing their status with the other Caring Community volunteers (NOT an all-Temple email blast).
  - (optional) ask if they would like to be put in contact with a network of "match-makers", members of our community who have experience dealing with their specific illness (when available)
- Leave your name and telephone number and confirm with a follow up phone call in about two weeks to check on their progress.
- Email or call us with an account of your interactions or send us the monthly contact form at the end of the month.

Thank you so much for your thoughtfulness, assistance and caring.

## Bikur Cholim Monthly Contact Form

Please complete this brief contact form and send it to Sandy Goldstein at [sandygoldstein@comcast.net](mailto:sandygoldstein@comcast.net) after your month is completed. Having this information will help us plan for future programs, staffing requirements and budgets. Your help in sending us this information is greatly appreciated.

1. Name of Volunteer: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Volunteer Month: \_\_\_\_\_ year \_\_\_\_

3. Congregants Contacted:

Name	Phone Contact Date	TLC Bag
1. _____	_____	Y/N ____

Are congregant's resources sufficient and/or is follow up needed?  
Please answer below and include any other comments.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. _____	_____	Y/N ____
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Are congregant's resources sufficient and/or is follow up needed?  
Please answer below and include any other comments.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. _____	_____	Y/N ____
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Are congregant's resources sufficient and/or is follow up needed?  
Please answer below and include any other comments.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Please share any comments you have regarding this experience that you think might be helpful to other volunteers, the clergy, or the program.

As always, thank you for your caring.

## **Tips For Visitors**

Bikur cholim visiting skills are skills for life. They include being fully present, and being a good listener and knowing proper visiting etiquette. These guidelines will help you in communicating your caring intention and being an effective visitor:

### ***Being fully present***

1. Try to put yourself in the other person's place.
2. Put aside daydreams and distraction from one's own problems or concerns.
3. Be alert to truly being with the person in front of you.

### ***Being a good listener***

Listening skills communicate empathy and understanding and can help facilitate a conversation.

Your posture conveys interest:

1. Maintain good eye-contact, sit at eye level if possible.
2. Use non-verbal encouragement such as nodding one's head or "uh huh"
3. Lean forward and relax
4. Avoid fidgeting, or making impatient gestures like watching the clock.

## **Listening**

1. Remain neutral and non-judgmental, with an open heart. This way you are more likely to really hear what the person is trying to convey. You can help them to put these feelings into words.

2. Reflect what you hear expressed, not how you would react. Listen between the lines to what emotion or feeling is being voiced. For example: A congregant might say, "I haven't been able to leave the house in weeks". You may respond something like "That sounds very hard." You are showing concern and that you are listening to the emotion behind the words.

3. Become comfortable with silence. Allow the person time to think and react. This will also convey an acceptance of what is being communicated without judgment.

4. Above all, compassionate listening is being interested in what the person is sharing and being sensitive to take your cue from them. Follow their lead. Talking about the latest movie you saw or a recent surgery could be equally appreciated, if the congregant gives you the cue to do so.

## **Keeping it real**

1. Never say "I know how you feel". Everyone experiences pain differently; even people who suffer the same ailments perceive it differently. You can say "It

sounds like you think (feel) it's pretty bad (sad/mad/glad). I'm here and I'm listening".

2. Use open-ended questions to keep up the conversation. These begin with "How... What... Could you tell me more about...?" Closed-ended questions that are less likely to elicit conversation begin "Who, When, Where".

3. Try not to mind-read and finish another person's sentences. When you truly listen actively you may be surprised where the person was going with his/her thought.

4. The visitor should not minimize or laugh off fears expressed by patients, even when they seem exaggerated.

5. Don't be afraid to clarify or gently explore what you are hearing. When a person is willing, you may ask questions to get to the heart of the matter.

### **Keep an open mind**

*Be aware of your own values, beliefs, and prejudices. You are participating in another person's world, not judging it.*

## **Seven ways of asking "How are you?"**

Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, LCSW

Simply asking "How are you?" may not convey your authentic personal interest and invite an honest, expressive response. Some people who are suffering have criticized this common question because it doesn't seem to acknowledge the very different course their life has taken—and can encourage automatic expected answers such as "I'm OK" or "Fine, thanks," which may not be a sincere reply or convey the whole story. Below are some suggested alternatives.

1. How are you doing with all of this?
2. How are your spirits?
3. How are you hanging in?
4. What do you need the most, right now?
5. What's helping you get through this?
6. What's been on your mind as you try to cope with all of this?
7. What are some of the obstacles to your managing/coping?

At all times we must be mindful that we are volunteers visiting congregants that we might not even have met before. Do make sure that conversation does not get too personal unless the person indicates they do want to speak on this level.

In many cases your conversation will not get personal at all. It is the gift of your presence and thoughtfulness which is most important.

## **Confidentiality**

*"a sacred trust" — re-emphasized*

The bikur cholim visitor is obligated to always protect a patient's privacy. Commonly, institutions such as hospitals will ask for a signed statement of confidentiality from volunteers. In most cases our visits will be in the homes so there is no formal confidentiality agreement entered into.

An important distinction must be drawn, however, between tale-bearing and helpful reporting. You should be alert to situations that might call for professional intervention. Observations you have made that may be crucial to a patient's well-being should be referred to either your Caring Community coordinator, the clergy or to the institution's staff. All communication and the activity of bikur cholim is to be kept confidential.

## **Taking care of yourself**

Participation as a bikur cholim visitor will bring you satisfaction, growth, and strength of spirit. The work is rewarding. Keep in mind the importance of knowing your strengths and limitations. Our personal experiences with and feelings about illness, disability, aging, death and dying all influence our reactions and relationships to those we visit.

### ***On Boundaries:***

"When we have good intentions and are clear that what we are doing has merit, then when we set boundaries we need not be apologetic, and there is no shame in that for ourselves or for the other. Healthy boundaries are established when the attributes of lovingkindness and strength are in balance..."

—Rabbi Uzi Weingarten, "Communicating with Compassion" 2003

### **Signs you may be too involved**

1. You are distracted at home and find yourself frequently wanting to talk about the person you are visiting. You are unable to get the patient off your mind.
2. You are overwhelmed by your own feelings of fear, anger and helplessness.
3. You find yourself saying "that could be me."

### **Factors influencing burn-out**

1. Lack of boundaries of what you/your group can and can not do.
2. Unrealistic expectations, spreading yourself too thin or wanting to 'fix' people's problems.
3. Identifying too closely with a patient's experience, reminding you of yourself or a loved one who suffered.

### **Saying "NO"**

It is especially hard to say NO to two groups of people: people for whom we feel sorry and people for whom we care. Remember your role, your intentions and your limits. But when asked to do something that you do not feel comfortable doing, it can still be hard to decline. \*\*\*This is a time when it is especially important to know your limits and stay true to them.

Be as brief as possible:

Simply state a legitimate reason for your refusal, "I really don't have the time," and avoid elaborate explanations, justifications, and "lies" (e.g. "I can't because my mother is coming in from out of town" or "My child is ill").

Actually say the word "No" when declining:

The word "no" has more power and is less ambiguous than, "Well, I just don't think so" or "We'll see" or "I can't just now." You might need to say "NO" several times before the person hears you.

### **What you can do if you suspect you are burning-out**

1. Talk to your bikur cholim leader or peers. Get support. You are not alone.
2. Go to a training. Figure out if you need to play a different role in your group.
3. Take some time off.
4. Set realistic goals

### ***Stress Management Tips***

1. Nurture yourself. List 5 things that you enjoy doing. Choose something that inspires or sustains (e.g. exercise, buy flowers, take a relaxing bath, nap, see a movie, listen to music, gardening).
2. Utilize deep breathing and relaxation exercises.
3. Journaling. Write out your thoughts. Be spontaneous. You can record what is stressing you or whatever surfaces as you put pen to paper.

Remember: Think positively of your accomplishments. Compliment yourself!

## **Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal**

*By Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.*

### **Just Listen**

I suspect that the most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention. And especially if it's given from the heart. When people are talking, there's no need to do anything but receive them. Just take them in. Listen to what they're saying. Care about it. Most times caring about it is even more important than understanding it. Most of us don't value ourselves or our love enough to know this. It has taken me a long time to believe in the power of simply saying, "I'm so sorry," when someone is in pain. And meaning it.

One of my patients told me that when she tried to tell her story people often interrupted to tell her that they once had something just like that happen to them. Subtly her pain became a story about themselves. Eventually she stopped talking to most people. It was just too lonely. We connect through listening.

When we interrupt what someone is saying to let them know that we understand, we move the focus of attention to ourselves. When we listen, they know we care. Many people with cancer talk about the relief of having someone just listen.

I have even learned to respond to someone crying by just listening. In the old days I used to reach for the tissues, until I realized that passing a person a tissue may be just another way to shut them down, to take them out of their experience of sadness and grief. Now I just listen. When they have cried all they need to cry, they find me there with them.

This simple thing has not been that easy to learn. It certainly went against everything I had been taught since I was very young. I thought people listened only because they were too timid to speak or did not know the answer. A loving silence often has far more power to heal and to connect than the most well intentioned words.

## Mi Shebeirach

This is the traditional prayer to recite for one who is ill. It is usually recited during the Torah service at synagogue, but can also be very comforting and healing when it is said at someone's bedside. The individual's Hebrew name is often included in the prayer, inserted in the blanks provided.

*Mi Shebirach for a male*

*Mi shebeirach avoteinu v'imoteinu, : Avraham, Yitzhak, v'Yaakov,  
Sarah, Rivka, Rachel v'Leah, Hu y'variech et hacholeh (name)\_\_\_\_\_  
HaKadosh Baruch Hu yimalei rachamim alav, l'hachalimo ul'rapo-to  
ul'hachazi-ko, v'yishlach lo m'heirah r'fuah sh'leimah min hashamayim,  
r'fuat hanefesh ur'fuat haguf, hash'ta ba-a-ga-lah uviz'man kariv.  
V'no-mar: Amein*

*Mi Shebirach for a female*

*Mi shebeirach avoteinu v'imoteinu, : Avraham, Yitzhak, v'Yaakov, Sarah, Rivka,  
Rachel v'Leah, Hu y'variech et hacholeh (name)\_\_\_\_\_  
HaKadosh Baruch Hu yimalei rachamim aleha, l'hachalimah ul'rapo-tah  
ul'hachazi-kah, v'yishlach lah m'heirah r'fuah sh'leimah min hashamayim,  
r'fuat hanefesh ur'fuat haguf, hash'ta ba-a-ga-lah uviz'man kariv.  
V'no-mar: Amein*

## Me Shebeirach

Debbie Friedman has composed a beautiful modern interpretation of the traditional prayer for healing, the Mishebeirach prayer

*Mi she-bei-rach a-vo-tei-nu*

*M'kor ha-bra-cha l'i-mo-tei-nu*

May the source of strength who blessed the ones before us  
Help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing,  
And let us say, Amen

*Mi she-bei-rach l-mo-tei*

*M'kor ha-bra-cha l'a-vo-tei-nu*

Bless those in need of healing, with *r'fu-a sh'lei-ma*  
The renewal of body, the renewal of spirit,  
And let us say, Amen

By Debbie Friedman

## Psalm for Caring Community

O God, creator of the heavens and of the earth,  
thank you for your abundant blessings.  
Thank you for opening our hearts wide enough,  
and long enough,  
to create this community of caring.

Thank you for permitting us,  
despite the chaotic demands of our days,  
and the fullness of our obligations,  
to find the place within us  
which understands that reaching out to others  
allows us to reach deeper within ourselves  
and create deeper meaning  
and satisfaction in our lives.  
For it is when we answer a call to help people  
when they need it most that we know the best within us.

As a group, we have delivered meals that nourished body and spirit, written  
cards and made calls that melted  
loneliness and gave hope, visited congregants  
in hospitals and at home, and delivered flowers and gifts--  
all of which helped draw an indelible circle  
of embrace around our congregation.

For all of this, source of strength and love,  
we offer thanks.

--Audrey Brooks Cownie, 2004  
Co-chair, Caring Community  
Temple Shaaray Tefila in Bedford, NY

Strange is our situation here upon earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know; that we are here for the sake of each other, above all, for those upon whose smile and well being our own happiness depends, and also for the countless unknown souls with whose fare we are connected by a bond of sympathy. Many times a day I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon by the labors of others, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received and am still receiving.

Albert Einstein

## Recommended Reading

*Many of the following books are available in the Temple library*

### Death and Mourning

***Jewish Mourner's Handbook*** by Rabbi Ron H. Isaacs and Kerry M. Olitsky

***The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*** by Maurice Lamm

***Making Loss Matter: Creating Meaning in Difficult Times*** by David Wolpe

***Grief in Our Seasons: A Mourner's Kaddish Companion*** by Rabbi Kerry M. Olitsky

***Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead, and Mourn as a Jew*** by Anita Diamant

### Illness

***We Are Not Alone: Learning to Live With Chronic Illness*** by Sefra Kobrin Pitzele

***The Shared Experience of Illness: Stories of Patients, Families, and Their Therapists*** by Susan H. McDaniel

***Give Me Your Hand: Traditional and Practical Guidance on Visiting the Sick*** by Jane Handler

### Healing

***The Courage To Grieve*** by Judy Tatelbaum

***Judaism, Medicine and Healing*** by Ronald H. Isaacs

***Healing of Soul, Healing of Body: Spiritual Leaders Unfold the Strength & Solace in Psalms*** ed. Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, CSW

***Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation*** by Michael Lerner

***Jewish Healing Wisdom***, by Steven Rosman

***Tears of Sorrow, Seeds of Hope: A Jewish Spiritual Companion for Infertility and Pregnancy Loss*** by Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin

***To Begin Again: The Journey Toward Comfort, Strength, and Faith in Difficult Times*** by Naomi Levy

### Jewish Life Cycle

***A Heart of Wisdom: Making the Jewish Journey from Midlife Through the Elder Years*** by Susan Berrin

***Gates of Mitzvah: A Guide to the Jewish Life Cycle*** by Central Conference of American Rabbis

***Rites of Passage: A Guide to the Jewish Life Cycle*** by Ronald H. Isaacs

## **Books for Children**

***When A Grandparent Dies: A Kid's Own Workbook*** by Nechama Liss-Levinson, PhD

***The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*** by Leo Buscaglia, PhD

***The Little Leaf*** by Chana Zuber-Sharfstein

## **Websites**

**Rabbi Isaac N. Trainin Bikur Cholim Coordinating Council**

Bikurcholimcc.org

**Rita Kaplan Jewish Connections Program** [jhhrn.org](http://jhhrn.org)

**National Center for Jewish Healing** [jewishhealing.org](http://jewishhealing.org)

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