



Parashat VaYera
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Parashat Vayera begins, “The Lord appeared to him in the plains of Mamrei, as he sat in the entrance of his tent, at the heat of the day.” The Talmud (Sota 14a) famously interprets this verse to mean that God “visited” Avraham, who was ailing from his recent circumcision. The Sages view God’s “visit” as setting the example of *bikur cholim*, visiting ill patients during their time of need. The Gemara further comments that by virtue of the obligation of *ve-halakha bi-drakhav*, which requires following God’s example, we, too, are bidden to show kindness to our ailing brethren by offering assistance and encouragement during their illness.

Maimonides codifies the obligation of *bikur cholim*, along with the other obligatory acts of kindness, in the fourteenth chapter of Hilkhot Avel:

There is an affirmative command issued by them [the Sages] to visit the ill, comfort mourners, bring the deceased [to burial], bring the bride [to her wedding], escort guests and tend to all the needs of burial...and also to rejoice with the bride and groom and assist them with all their needs.

Curiously, however, Maimonides does not introduce these obligations in the context of *ve-halakha bi-drakhav*, a commandment which he discusses much earlier in *Mishneh Torah*, in Hilkhot Dei’ot (chapter 1). Here, Maimonides points to a different basis for the obligation of *gemilut chasadim* (performing kindness), namely, the obligation of *ve-ahavta le-rei’akha kamokha* – “you shall love your fellow as yourself.” He writes:

Although all these commandments are from their [the Sages’] words, they are included under [the obligation of] ‘you shall love your fellow as yourself’ – everything that you want others to do for you – you shall do them for your fellow in Torah and *mitzvot*.

According to Maimonides, then, obligations such as *bikur cholim* fall under the rubric of *ve-ahavta le-rei’akha kamokha*, the command to treat our fellow as we wish to be treated.

Maimonides’ comments give rise to the question concerning the relationship between this command and the obligation of *ve-halakha bi-drakhav*. In Hilkhot Dei’ot, as mentioned, Maimonides codifies the obligation to “follow the ways of God,” to follow His example of graciousness and compassion. Presumably, this would also include the acts of kindness that he lists in Hilkhot Avel as required by virtue of the obligation of *ve-ahavta le-rei’akha kamokha*. What, then, is the difference between these two obligations? What does the command of “love your fellow as yourself” add to the *mitzva* of “following in the ways of God”?

Rabbi J. David Bleich (see www.maimonidesheritage.org/ContentFolder/4/MitzvatAsei8.pdf) suggested that the difference between these two commands is the difference between kindness and character development. *Ve-ahavta le-rei'akha kamokha* requires us to act kindly toward others, to show concern for others as we show concern for ourselves. *Ve-halakhta bi-drakhav*, by contrast, entails a much a different requirement, namely, to become kind, gracious, caring people. This command relates not to fulfilling the needs of others, but rather to refining one's own character. We are bidden to not only act kindly, but to be kind; not only to show sensitivity, but to be sensitive. In this way, we do a service both to others and to ourselves; we fulfill both the command to care for those in need, and also the obligation to develop and refine our characters to the very best of our ability.