

# Honoring Fragile Strength: Visiting the Sick

## Prologue: Validating the Sick

When Rabbi Helbo fell ill, Rabbi Kahana made it known: Rabbi Helbo is sick. But none visited him. Rabbi Kahana rebuked the community saying: Wasn't it the case that one of Rabbi Akiba's students fell ill and the sages failed to visit him? Rabbi Akiba went to visit him, and because they swept and sprinkled the ground before the master, the student recovered! My master, said the student, you have revived me! ....

(Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 40a)

## The Visitor's Pilgrimage

Rabin said in Rab's name: From what source do we know that the Almighty sustains the sick? From the verse: *The Lord will sustain him on his sickbed* (Psalm 41:4). It was taught also in reference to this verse: One who visits the sick must not sit upon the bed or on a stool or a chair but must robe himself respectfully and sit upon the ground because the Divine Presence rests above the sick person's bed, as it is written: *The Lord will sustain him on his sickbed* (Psalm 41:4)

(Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 40a)

## Continuing The Ancient Conversation

One who visits the sick should not sit upon a bed or upon a chair or upon a stool but should sit in front of the patient, for the Divine Presence rests above a sick person.

*Gloss: This applies only if the patient lies upon the ground, but if the patient lies upon a bed then it is permissible for the visitor to sit upon a chair or a stool. And this is our custom.*

(from the Shulhan Arukh/Set Table, a Sefardic/Israeli 16<sup>th</sup> century code usually published together with a famous 16<sup>th</sup> century Ashkenazi commentary that notes differences in custom.)

## **Modern Voices: Illness' Revelations**

The patient is always on the brink of revelation, and he needs an amanuensis. (Anatole Broyard, in, Intoxicated By My Illness, p.44)

I have experienced life-threatening illness twice. I had a heart attack when I was thirty-nine and cancer at age forty. Now that these illnesses are in remission, why go back and write about them? Because illness is an opportunity, though a dangerous one. To seize this opportunity I need to remain with illness a little longer and share what I have learned through it.

Illness takes away parts of your life, but in doing so it gives you the opportunity to choose the life you will lead, as opposed to living out the one you have simply accumulated over the years....

Defining my heart attack as an incident left me dependent on good health, which I once again assumed as my right. I still did not know how to enjoy health without making it a condition of my life. We are free only when we no longer require health, however much we may prefer it.

(Arthur Frank, At the Will of the Body, pp.1,21)

## **Epilogue: The Validating of the Sick**

Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi would learn a matter from thirteen points of view and then teach Rabbi Hiyya seven of them.

In the end, Rabbi Yehudah fell sick and forgot his learning. Thereupon, Rabbi Hiyya restored to him the seven versions which the master had taught him, but the other six were lost. Now, there was a certain laundryman who had overheard Rabbi Yehudah when he was studying by himself; so Rabbi Hiyya was able to learn the lost interpretations from the laundryman and then he repeated them before Rabbi Yehudah. When Rabbi Yehudah met the laundryman, he said to him: You have made both Hiyya and me. Others say that he told the laundryman: You have made Hiyya and he has made me.

(Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 41a)