



Chayim Aruchim חיים ארוכים  
Center for Culturally Sensitive Health Advocacy & Counseling

A PROJECT OF AGUDATH ISRAEL OF AMERICA

# THE SANCTITY OF *Life*

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**Chayim Aruchim** חיים ארוכים

Center for Culturally Sensitive Health Advocacy & Counseling

A PROJECT OF AGUDATH ISRAEL OF AMERICA

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## About Us

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### CHAYIM ARUCHIM

The mission of Chayim Aruchim is to help the Jewish community worldwide when confronted with critical illness or end-of-life decisions. With a team of experienced medically trained Rabbis, doctors, lawyers, and high-level government policy experts, Chayim Aruchim guides and advocates for critically ill patients and protects their rights. Chayim Aruchim helps them choose the best path forward, both medically and halachically. Chayim Aruchim's 24 hour hotline responds to those who want to live.

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### CHAYIM ARUCHIM INSTITUTE FOR HALACHA AND MEDICINE

FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS SEEKING GUIDANCE

The mission of Chayim Aruchim Institute for Halacha and Medicine is to provide health clinicians, including doctors, physician assistants, nurses, and others, essential Halacha and Hashkafa support in navigating complex situations within their professional lives. We recognize that the intersection of medicine and halacha demands nuanced guidance and expertise, as healthcare providers face increasingly intricate challenges.

**The Institute is a Clinical Collaboration of Chayim Aruchim Inc. and its Board Members,  
Chemed and Mayanei Hayeshua Medical Center**

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# Letter on behalf of Chayim Aruchim from **Hagaon Rav Chaim Kanievsky זצ"ל** and **Hagaon Rav Yitzchok Zilberstein שליט"א**

## Le'chvod Acheinu Bnei Yisroel, May Hashem Protect Them

As many of you know, Agudas Yisroel of America has established an organization named "Chayim Aruchim" in the United States, under the auspices of Harav Tzvi Ausch shlit"a (a prominent moreh hora'ah and great medical expert). Chayim Aruchim is dedicated to help terminally ill and elderly patients receive the proper medical care that they require according to Halacha, based on the hora'os and hadracha from the gedolei haposkim shlit"a. The organization has a 24-hour, six days a week phone line available for all those who seek guidance for the sick and their families.

Baruch Hashem, the organization has thus far been very successful at lengthening and saving the lives of hundreds of patients who would otherwise have been left in the hands of medical professionals who do not heed Daas Torah, and regularly cut off water and other vital forms of sustenance and medicine from terminally ill patients.

In order to achieve this desired outcome, the organization guides the families of patients with regards to where they should take the patient after being discharged from the hospital. They help them find a location where they would have access to dialysis, sustenance, and fluids for the elderly and terminally ill. There are very few locations where a patient can have access to all his medical necessities according to Halacha. Chayim Aruchim also does whatever it can to prevent any legal intervention that can potentially withhold from the patients their necessary treatment, and they invest many resources into raising awareness in the frum community of how to deal with these situations properly al pi halacha. With Hashem's help, they continue to save chayei sha'ah, as well as weeks and even years of life for these patients.



## לכבוד אחינו בני ישראל ה' ישמרם

היות שנתייסד בארצות הברית אירגון בשם "חיים ארוכים" ע"י אגודת ישראל באמריקה, תחת הדרכת הרב צבי אויש שליט"א (מורה הוראה מובהק ומומחה גדול בענייני רפואה) ומטרת האירגון לסייע לחולים סופניים וקשישים להשיג הטיפול הרפואי כפי הנצרך להלכה לפי הוראת ועצת הרבנים שליט"א, יש להאירגון קו חם פתוח עשרים וארבעה שעות - שש ימי השבוע, לענות לכל שואל ומבקש ולהדריך החולה ומשפחתו.

ברוך השם שכבר הצליחו להציל ולהאריך חייהם של מאות חולים שמבלעדי הייעוץ והדרכה הנכונה היו נתונים בידי רופאים שאינם שומעים לדעת תורה ומנעו מהם מים ומזון ותרופות הנצרכים להמשיך חייהם.

כדי להשיג תועלת הנרצה, מדריכים כפי הצורך מה המקום הנכון שיששה החולה אחר יציאתו מבית החולים, למשל באיזה מקום אפשר להשיג דיאליזה מאכל ונוזלים אף לקשישים וחולים ביותר, ומעטים מאוד המקומות שאפשר להשיג כל הנצרך על פי הלכה והוראת הרבנים.

כן מטפלים הנהלת האירגון למונע חוקים ומשפטים שיכולים להפריע לחולים להשיג מבוקשם, ומעוררים את הציבור הרחב לעמוד על המשמר לידע להזהר מכל הנ"ל ומצילים ב"ה חיי שעה, והרבה פעמים גם חיי ימים ושנים לטובה ב"ה.

כמובן שכל זה עולה להוצאות רבות מידי יום ביומו ואין הקומץ משביע את הארי, הנני בזה לעורר הציבור לתמוך במוסד זה. ולידע שדעת התורה הק' הוא שזה נכלל במצות הצלת נפשות, ובודאי יועיל לתרום את החרדים לדבר ד'.



ת"ת ק"א ז"ל  
תש"מ

Of course, it is self-understood that these initiatives require much funding to accomplish their day-to-day achievements in this great mitzvah. I would like to encourage the tzibbur to support this organization, and to be aware that this is clearly included in the mitzvah of hatzolas nefashos chareidim l'dvar Hashem should contribute to this great cause.

# Gedolei Poskim Sign Important P'sak Halacha Regarding Pikuach Nefesh

Being that in recent times we were made aware of certain occasions in the treatment of seriously ill patients, *rachmana litzlan*, when families failed to follow halacha in very serious situations because of a prevailing lack of knowledge in the fundamentals of the halacha of life-and-death situations, it is upon us with this document to awaken the hearts of the tzibur to know and to be careful.

**At a time when the condition of the sick person deteriorates to the point where the doctors indicate not to continue treatment, it is obligatory for the family to:**

- **Ask a shailoh to a Rav as soon as possible to receive daas Torah at every step**, and since the situation and the questions for each sick person are completely unique, therefore they should not depend upon and compare a psak that is given to one choleh to apply to another choleh. The family should talk directly to the Rav and not depend upon a secondhand source.
- **It is imperative for the family to refuse and to prevent the doctors from doing any test whose purpose is to clarify if there is still life in the brain stem.** This includes tests called the apnea test, nuclear scan, "doll's eye" test, etc. (This also includes another test where they put cold water into the patient's ear.)
- Boruch Hashem, our Askanim succeeded recently in getting a court decision that established clearly that there is a right for the choleh and his family to prevent the above-mentioned brain death tests. **If a family encounters any difficulty in refusing these tests, either because of the doctor or the hospital administrators who want to force the choleh to undergo these tests, then the family should turn to the Askanim and the organizations that are involved in this area.**

Hashem Yisborach should help all Yidden who are sick to be cured and to live a happy life.



**Horav Dovid Feinstein**  
Rosh Yeshiva, Mesivta Tiferes Yerushalayim

**Horav Shmuel Kamenetzky**  
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**Horav Yechezkel Roth**  
Av Beis Din, Karlburg

**Horav Zvi Ausch**  
Av Beis Din, Volkin

**Horav Binyomin Landau**  
Dayan, Tosch-Boro Park

# BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Agudath Israel of America, which founded Chayim Aruchim, has a long-standing commitment to end-of-life issues. In 1987, its former President, Rabbi Morris Sherer, initiated, advocated for, and helped pass legislation in New York State regarding Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) policies. He did the same for other health care legislation. Before 2010, a letter to a hospital from Agudath Israel of America sufficed to address medical decisions conflicting with religious beliefs.

By 2010, the scope of the difficulties encountered by families expanded, and Chayim Aruchim was established. Families are now facing urgent medical choices and are receiving discouraging advice such as being told to “give up- there is nothing we can do”, continued care is futile, sign a DNR, feeding tubes don’t help, don’t intubate, or discharge to hospice. Families don’t know enough about medicine to thoroughly understand the implications of their choices and they don’t know enough about Jewish law to know when they are required to pursue treatment and when they are not.

## Medical professionals play a crucial role in shaping these decisions.

For example-

The patient is an 80-year-old woman and is not eating. One solution is to put in a feeding tube.

**Scenario #1:** The medical professional comes into the hospital room and tells the family , "I am sure that you don't want to give her a feeding tube and cause her discomfort". This presentation might lead the family to think, “we don’t want to cause Mom any pain, so we agree”.

**Scenario #2:** The medical professional comes into the hospital room and tells the family , "I have great news. We can extend your mother's life by giving her a feeding tube. It will be uncomfortable but eventually we can probably get her off the feeding tube. The discomfort will be temporary, and it can extend her life and she will be able to enjoy her grandchildren for years to come." Of course the family would say “That sounds great. Go ahead with the procedure.”

## Chayim Aruchim emerged to bridge the gap.

Recognizing the need to empower families facing life-and-death decisions with comprehensive information, we offer a multidisciplinary approach with responders possessing advanced medical, religious, and legal expertise. Our 24-hour hotline, staffed by medically trained Rabbis, ensures families receive informed guidance aligned with both medical best practices and Jewish values.

*Over the years, we have continuously developed relationships with hospital administrators, educating them about the specific needs of religious Jewish patients. We have reached out to the highest levels of Jewish Rabbinic authorities for special decisions regarding health care. We have kept in contact with legislators and advocated for legislation protecting our rights. Finally, we have reached out to inspire the Jewish community and to educate them about our organization and the kind of clarification and help that we provide.*

## The Institute

Presently, we are inaugurating the Chayim Aruchim Institute for Halacha and Medicine, jointly sponsored by Chayim Aruchim Inc, its board members, CHEMED, and Mayanei Hayeshua Medical Center in Bnei Brak. This institute is established with the mission of offering Halachic and ethical guidance to healthcare professionals such as PAs, nurses, medical students, residents, fellows, and attendings. These professionals often encounter intricate healthcare dilemmas, and the institute aims to provide Halachic insights to navigate these complex situations.

**This brochure contains documents that will give you an idea of the work that we have been doing and will continue to do with the help of Hashem.**

Chayim Aruchim acknowledges that values may differ, emphasizing the demand for health care facilities to recognize and respect diverse values. Our mission aligns with the fundamental American principle of self-determination, striving to ensure that medical care is provided in accordance with the patient's values, fostering a harmonious balance between Halacha and healthcare.



### Dedicated in memory of Dr. Moshe Rothschild founder of Mayanei Hayeshua Hospital

לזכר נשמת ר' משה בן ר' יוסף ז"ל

Dr. Moshe Rothschild, the visionary founder of Mayanei Hayeshua Medical Center, dedicated his life to alleviating the suffering of others. The hospital is called a Bais Refuah (a place of healing) instead of a Bais Chloim (a house for sick patients). Through the hospital, he brought to life his vision of a medical institution providing exceptional care while nurturing a culture of warmth and compassion in the sacred atmosphere of Bnei Brak.

Patients at Mayanei Hayeshua are guaranteed comprehensive support within clinical norms and in alignment with Halacha.

His influence played a pivotal role in the establishment of Chayim Aruchim.

Yehi Zichro Boruch

# Important message from Chayim Aruchim **To the Patient's Family Members Regarding Hospice**

Consultation with a knowledgeable Rav is necessary before a decision is made to admit the patient to hospice care. Once the decision is made that admitting the patient to hospice care is appropriate, you need to be mindful that while hospice care can offer certain benefits, it can also present its own set of Halachic challenges.

## **PAIN MEDICATIONS**

Pain medication will likely be offered/prescribed to relieve a patient's pain symptoms. Relieving pain is very important. It is important to note, however, that certain pain medications could cause respiratory suppression and expedite death, which is against halacha. The Rabbonim of Chayim Aruchim can assist you in your discussions with the physician about pain medications and making sure the patient receives appropriate care.

## **DNR AND DNI ORDERS**

When offered Do No Resuscitate (DNR) or Do Not Intubate (DNI) advanced care directives at ANY medical facility, do NOT sign them UNLESS you first discuss the situation with a knowledgeable Rabbi. Only a Halachic Medical Directive should be signed.

## **NUTRITION, HYDRATION & MEDICATION**

According to Halacha, nutrition, and hydration (food and drink) must be provided to a patient in almost all cases. When discussing hydration and nutrition, make sure to ask a knowledgeable Rov before making any decisions. In reference to medication, any symptoms that might indicate infection or other illnesses should be treated. The Rabbonim of Chayim Aruchim can be particularly helpful in discussing pertinent medical issues with your physician and medical staff, and can then guide you to make the most appropriate decisions according to Halacha.

## **CHAYIM ARUCHIM**

DO call Chayim Aruchim, ANY time you need us! We are here for you. There is simply too much at stake to "go it alone"! Chayim Aruchim has trained Rabbis in the field of Medical Halacha to advise, you and your physician.

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# GUIDANCE FROM THE TORAH

## The Sanctity of Life



### The Steipler's Insight About a Yid in a Coma

The Gemara in Kiddushin (40a) says that if someone thought of doing a mitzvah but became an **דנון** – that is, he was unable to do the mitzvah due to circumstances beyond his control – then it is as if he did the mitzvah. The Steipler zt”l uses this Gemara to explain why it is important to keep someone alive who is in a coma. On Sukkos, the person in the coma would have wanted to shake the lulav. On erev Shabbos, the comatose woman would have wanted to light candles. At the zmanim for davening, the person in the coma would have wanted to daven. But the person is an **דנון**! The longer the person lives, even in a coma, the more mitzvos he will get, because if he were up and around – he would have loved to do these mitzvos.

### I Want To Live Forever

Comprehending the tremendous sanctity of life, while on the other hand recognizing our vulnerability to death, requires considerable understanding.

Sometimes people temporarily forget the value of life. Sometimes, a seriously ill person expresses himself, saying that he has had enough, he is in pain, and he is ready to give up. However, when a crisis arises and the question is whether to call Hatzalah or not, this same patient will cry out loud: “Call Hatzalah right away! I want to live!”

A person has a natural desire to live. Rav Leib Bakst zt”l, in his sefer on Chumash, discusses this issue in his dvar Torah on Parshas Tetzaveh. He says that we know that when Hashem created Adam, he was supposed to live forever. If not for the chet (sin), everyone would have lived forever. This technically means that in physical terms, man was created to be able to live forever. This did not change.

### I Don't Want to Die

My father was in a concentration camp. He was beaten viciously and was given very little to eat, but he always wanted to live. At one point, he heard a rumor that the Germans were planning on taking all the Jews to the front lines in the battle between the Germans and the Russians in order to serve as human shields. My father decided that he was not going to go, period. He had no intention to end his life just yet. So, he put his foot on a log and slammed an axe onto it, creating a large gash between his big toe and his smaller ones. He was rushed to the hospital, bleeding profusely and in great pain. His recuperation took a couple of months.



One day, the doctor told my father that he was going to review his case the following day to determine if he was ready to be discharged. That night, my father tied up his foot in a manner that it would be suspended in an upward position; that way, the blood would be drained from his foot over the course of the night, making it look very sickly in the morning. And so, the doctor came the next day and deemed my father unfit to be discharged.

My father wanted to live. He wanted to be reunited with his wife. He wanted to raise a family, to which he ultimately was zoche beyond his or anyone's expectations.

## Starvation is a Most Painful Death

וַיִּרְבּוּ הָעָם עִם-מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְאֹמֶר וְלוֹ גֹועֵנוּ בְּגֹוע אֲחִינוּ לִפְנֵי ד'  
פרשת חקת פרק כ' פסוק ג'

This pasuk says that the people argued with Moshe and said that they would rather have died a natural death in the midbar (or even like those who died of plague) than die from thirst.

Rashi says that we learn from this pasuk that dying from thirst is worse than all other deaths.

This is an important response to those in the medical field who are reluctant to give nutrition and hydration to a terminal patient because "we should just focus on keeping him comfortable."

Hospice philosophy wants us to believe that the least painful death is through starvation and withholding fluids. They believe that this is a very dignified and pleasant death.

The Igros Moshe in Choshen Mishpat writes that eating and drinking keep a person alive, and these are essential even if they are provided artificially.

## A Holocaust survivor shared the following memory:

In a concentration camp, this Yid was literally starving to death. So much so, that at night when they were sleeping in the barracks, he could hear people chewing in their sleep, subconsciously attempting to eat something. Of course, the biggest problem was that they were extremely weak physically. But, at the same time, this Holocaust survivor said that even worse than the weakening, was the fact that one's mind was completely occupied every second of the day with searching and wanting to eat something. In addition to the deterioration of the physical body, there was the deterioration of the mind that was totally occupied with only one thing – food. When someone is starving, there is nothing else that they can think of, and it creates deterioration of the mind.

Even if the person is dying, and even if there are no possible treatments,  
food and fluids must be given; a person cannot live without them.

Download  
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# Every moment of life is the greatest gift



**TIMELESS GUIDANCE FROM OUR GEDOLIM**



**Chayim Aruchim** חיים ארוכים

Center for Culturally Sensitive Health Advocacy & Counseling

A PROJECT OF AGUDATH ISRAEL OF AMERICA

HORAV MOSHE  
FEINSTEIN ל"צ ז



## *A Yid knows what life's all about*

In a hospital bed in Manhattan's Mount Sinai Hospital, R' Yitzchok lay in pain. The head of the department sat down on the chair beside the bed, took a deep breath and said: "My friend, the test results were terrible. The disease has spread all over your body."

Tears began to stream down the patient's face. "Is there any cure? Any possible route I can still try to take?"

The doctor, showing compassion, replied, "There is a surgery that can still be done, but it will only give you another six months to live – six months that will be filled with pain across your entire body. Is that the path that you wish to take? Perhaps it would be better for you to pass on sooner, with as little pain as possible?"

After the gravity of the situation finally sunk in, R' Yitzchok turned his face towards his son. "Please take me to Rav Moshe Feinstein. I must speak with him, I wish to speak with him face to face. Please, do this *chesed* for me; please, take me to Reb Moshe," he begged.

And so, the frail and deathly ill R' Yitzchok was brought to Reb Moshe's home in a wheelchair. R' Yitzchok proceeded to tell the *tzaddik* all about his dreadful condition and the harrowing prognosis he had just received. "Rebbe, what should I do? Should I opt for the surgery, or should I allow the *Malach Ha'maves* to take me naturally in the coming days?"

R' Yitzchok's account was too much for the *tzaddik's* gentle and loving soul to bear. After a few minutes of properly absorbing the deadly information, Reb Moshe got back to himself. "My son," he began in a whisper. "You must go back to the hospital and ask them to perform the surgery at once."

"Listen to what I'm telling you, my dear friend. "The other people in this world – they live for the pleasures that life has to offer. If the only choice they had would be to be bedridden and inflicted with agony for six months – they would surely rather die. What would be left for them to accomplish in their lives anyway. But a Yid

knows what life's all about. It's about grabbing *mitzvos* at every opportunity possible!" Reb Moshe's voice grew stronger, and he exclaimed: "R' Yitzchok – you're a Yid! A *yerei shomayim*! You will still be able to put on *tefillin*! You will be able to *daven*, to do *teshuvah*... You will still be able to learn some *Chumash* or *Mishnayos* if you're able to muster the strength! Is that all not worth the pain?"

R' Moshe then continued: "Just imagine, R' Yitzchok, how many *mitzvos* a person can accomplish in a half a year. In just one minute, a person can learn 200 words of Torah – and each word is a *mitzvah* that is considered more valuable than anything else in the Torah. Each minute that passes can be spent having *charatah* (regret) on any of the *aveiros* one has done throughout their life. The doctors are guaranteeing you a 'mere' six months – but these six months can be converted into *netzach nitzachim*, millions of years in Olam Habah! Is it not *kedai* (worthwhile)?"

The chief surgeon arrived at R' Yitzchok's bedside to hear his final decision. The patient assertively stated that he wished to proceed with the operation. He then repeated his entire conversation with Reb Moshe, word for word.

"Listen, my friend," the surgeon began, wiping away the tears, "I am a Jew. I came here from Israel many years ago to study medicine and surgery. Before long, I became the chief surgeon in Mount Sinai Hospital. I never knew what it meant to be a Jew... To truly value life and recognize that every minute is given to us for a purpose. "The first and last time I put on *tefillin* was the day of my Bar Mitzvah. I never understood the value of it; today is the first time I am hearing the truth."

The surgeon got up to leave the room, but then turned around and asked: "This Rabbi of yours, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein – where does he live? Perhaps I can go see him?"

R' Yitzchok's surgery was a success. As the months went by, he tried his utmost to accomplish as many *mitzvos* and *maasim tovim* that he could possibly get his hands on. And, to everyone's surprise, the six month mark came and went; R' Yitzchok continued to live on for another few years, wherein he endured pain but learned Torah and cleaved to Hakadosh Baruch Hu nonetheless.

At one point, during a routine visit to Mount Sinai, R' Yitzchok bumped into the chief surgeon. But this was obviously not the same person that sat at his bedside many months before; he wore a big *yarmulke* on his head, and the ends of his long *tzitzis* were visible at the bottom of his white coat. The surgeon immediately recognized R' Yitzchok, and warmly shook his hand.

"R' Yitzchok!" he exclaimed. "That day that I met you and your Rebbe has changed my life. You know, you went through a tough surgery then, but so did I..." the surgeon said with a broad smile. "You had a surgery on your liver – but I went through a heart transplant. I rid myself of my previous life and rededicated my heart to my Creator. Starting that day, I began to live with a new heart, indeed..."

*Reproduced and translated with permission from  
Sefer Darkei Moshe by Rabbi Shachne Mendel Scheiner*



## *Every minute is extremely valuable*

**R'** Aharon Dov Gellis *shlit"l* recounted the following story:

I once had a relative who contracted a severe illness *r"l*, and the doctors were periodically treating him with blood transfusions in order to lengthen his life — but these procedures were only capable of granting him a few more days, possibly even mere hours of life. Each time he underwent a transfusion, the patient endured pain all over his body.

Deeply troubled by the agonizing pain my relative was going through, I approached the Chazon Ish *zt"l* and asked him: Is it worthwhile to keep on putting him through these procedures if they are causing him such pain — and he is only gaining such minuscule amounts of life from them? The Chazon Ish immediately replied: "יעדער מינוט לעבן פון א איד איז ביי רבש"ע טייער!" ("Each and every minute that a Yid lives is extremely valuable to the Ribono shel Olam!") He then assertively instructed me to tell the doctors to continue with the blood transfusions as needed.

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Sefer Maasei Ish Chelek 4, by Rav Tzvi Yabrov*

## SATMAR REBBE זצ"ל

# על פי התורה אשר יורוד



I remember how one time, I went along with the Satmar Rebbe to be *menachem avel* a certain Yid who had recently lost his father.

Sitting quietly at the Rebbe's side, I was able to glean from the conversation that the avel's father *a"h* was very ill before his *petirah*, and he had to undergo a very serious and taxing procedure. Apparently, this Yid didn't want to go through the procedure; he felt that the ensuing, post-surgery pain would be just too much for him. But his sons, including this *avel*, had discussed the issue with the Rebbe, and he had instructed them to convince their father to go ahead with it. As it turned out, the procedure wasn't very helpful, and the Yid passed away a few days later, amidst extreme pain.

It seemed very clear that the avel was experiencing a form of survivor's guilt; he was regretting the fact that he had convinced his father to undergo a difficult procedure that didn't even end up saving his life and resulted in more pain than gain. The Rebbe seemed to notice this Yid's feelings, and he began addressing the issue right when he walked in: "You shouldn't feel bad about what happened. *Al pi Torah*, you were obligated to go ahead with the surgery! A person is *mechuyav* to listen to the doctors when they recommend a procedure that can potentially lengthen someone's life. You did what Hashem wanted you to do! The fact that your father passed away – that's an entirely unrelated matter. That happened because that was the *gezeirah* from Shomayim; it had nothing to do with your decision."

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Gilyon Bakodesh Chazisicha as told by Rabbi Shlomo Heiman*

RAV CHAIM  
KANIEVSKY זצ"ל

*The greatest gift  
a person can have*



**R**av Chaim Kanievsky once told his grandson R' Aryeh Koledetski: “Every moment of life, even if accompanied by the worst suffering, is the greatest gift a person can have.”

The Gemara (*Sotah* 11a) relates that Pharoah consulted three advisors on how to deal with his Jewish subjects: Bilaam, Yisro, and Iyov. Bilaam, who counseled him to enslave the Jews, was punished with death. Iyov, who kept silent, was punished with a life of suffering. Yisro, who fled, was rewarded by having his descendants sit in the Sanhedrin. Why was Iyov, who remained silent, punished with a life of unbearable suffering, while Bilaam, who harmed the Jews, received the much quicker, relatively painless punishment of instant death? Rav Chaim answered that despite the torturous pain endured by Iyov all his life, he was granted the gift of life. Bilaam, however, lost his life – a far greater punishment. Every second of life is priceless, for it gives one the ability to serve Hashem and – for someone like Iyov – the ability to do *teshuvah*.

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*“The sanctity of human life outweighs  
all earthly possessions”*

—RAV SHAMSHON RAPHAEL HIRSCH זצ"ל





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A BIKUR CHOLIM GUIDE

# *Comforting the Sick*

*A personal perspective by*

**RABBI SIMCHA LEFKOWITZ**

*Rav of Congregation Anshei Chesed, Hewlett, NY*

*Twenty years ago I experienced an unusual and undiagnosed neurological condition that totally incapacitated me for a period of time.*

*With Hashem's help, the support of my wife Shoshana, my family, friends from Congregation Anshei Chesed and others, I have been able to regain a portion of my functions and have begun to partially return to some my regular-life activities.*

*Both during this period and after, I reflected on what was said to me by well-wishers, and I sought insight and comfort from the words and teachings of Chazal. I would like to share with you some of what I have learned from this process.*

**I have struggled for many years to understand fully the meaning of the *Bracha* we give to every *Choleh*, 'May you have a *Refuah Shelama*,' 'May you be healed completely.'**

**Why is it necessary to specify '*Shelama*'?**

**Would anyone wish for a *Choleh* to be healed only partially?**

**What is a *Refuah* that is not *Shelama*?**

One morning during *Davening*, the meaning of this phrase became very clear to me: When you become seriously ill, the sickness attacks your body physically and the *Neshoma* emotionally and spiritually. Almost always, there are feelings of depression, anxiety, tension and loss of *Bitachon* and *Emunah*. These emotions attack your soul, your *Neshoma* in complex ways. Often the *Choleh* is healed from his physical disease but continues to be plagued with many difficulties due to his '*Neshoma* disease.' This part of the illness can be longer-lasting and more insidious than the physical part. That's the meaning of *Shelama* – that the *Choleh* should be wholly healed, both in body and spirit. So, when you wish someone a '*Refuah Shelama*,' know what you are saying! When visiting a *Choleh*, even though you may not be able to help him physically, there are many types of healing you can bring for his '*spiritual sickness*.'



## *The True Purpose of Bikur Cholim*

People ask, ‘what can I really do for the *Choleh*? Why am I really here?’ As you visit the patient, you wonder what to say. Often, people ask the *Choleh* questions like, ‘Have you tried this? What about that hospital or that specialist? What does the doctor say?’ These questions can be bothersome, annoying and even insulting. You are not there with a stethoscope and a white coat. For the average visitor, there is not much you can do for the patient’s physical health.

There is, on the other hand, a great deal you can do for the *Choleh*’s emotional well-being. It is well-known that the beginning of healing comes from the spiritual. Even secular books discuss that this is the gateway, the pathway for healing. Norman Cousins described how a program of humor and laughter generated endorphins, which helped his recovery from cancer. You bring *Refuah* to the *Choleh* in the form of personal interaction and even by acting silly. If we consider your visit from this point of view, you can be just as helpful to the patient as the doctor. You’re not just a visitor—you’re a doctor for the soul, and you don’t need a license for that. Friendly conversation, prayers, singing, jokes, and balloons are all available without a prescription. The visitor with a caring heart can bring about real changes in the *Choleh*’s *Neshoma*.



## *Comforting the Choleh*

The question of how to comfort a *Choleh* and how one should act when visiting a *Choleh* is one that requires great sensitivity and thoughtfulness. The usual conversational approaches might work for people with minor or temporary problems, but they need to be modified for the *Choleh* whose situation is more severe. Only someone who has been on the receiving end of such remarks can understand first-hand the positive and negative effects they can have.

*The visitor’s intention is to make the Choleh feel stronger by comparison... In reality these statements actually have the opposite effect,*

One type of statement that is well-meant, but actually quite detrimental is, ‘See, someone else has it bad too’, or ‘So-and-so has it worse than you.’ Other damaging comments to a *Choleh* are a visitor’s reports that someone has recently died, or someone else is still sick, or another has had a heart attack. The visitor’s intention is to make the *Choleh* feel stronger by comparison or to make him understand how fortunate he should feel that he is not as ill as so-and-so. In reality these statements actually have the opposite effect, causing a *Choleh* to feel even worse. Why?

Consider this story from the 14th Chapter of the *Avos* D'Rabbi Nassan:

### אבות דרב נתן פרק י"ד

כשמת בנו של רבן יוחנן בן זכאי נכנסו תלמידיו לנחמו. נכנס רבי אליעזר וישב לפניו וא"ל רבי רצונך אומר דבר אחד לפניך א"ל אמור. א"ל אדה"ר היה לו בן ומת וקבל עליו תנחומין. אף אתה קבל תנחומין א"ל לא די לי שאני מצטער בעצמי אלא שהזכרת לי צערו של אדה"ר. נכנס ר' יהושע וא"ל רצונך אומר דבר אחד לפניך א"ל אמור. א"ל איוב היו לו בנים ובנות ומתו כולם ביום אחד וקבל עליהם תנחומין אף אתה קבל תנחומין. א"ל לא די לי שאני מצטער בעצמי אלא שהזכרת לי צערו של איוב.

נכנס ר' יוסי וישב לפניו א"ל רבי רצונך אומר דבר אחד לפניך א"ל אמור. א"ל אהרן היו לו שני בנים גדולים ומתו שניהם ביום אחד וקבל עליהם תנחומין ואף אתה קבל תנחומין. א"ל לא די לי שאני מצטער בעצמי אלא שהזכרתני צערו של אהרן.

נכנס ר"ש וא"ל רבי רצונך אומר דבר אחד לפניך א"ל אמור. א"ל דוד המלך היה לו בן ומת וקבל עליו תנחומין ואף אתה קבל תנחומין אף אתה רבי קבל תנחומין. א"ל לא די שאני מצטער בעצמי אלא שהזכרתני צערו של דוד המלך.

נכנס ר"א בן עזריה כיון שראהו אמר לשמשו טול לפני כלי ולך אחרי לבית המרחץ לפי שאדם גדול הוא ואיני יכול לעמוד בו נכנס וישב לפניו ואמר לו אמשול לך משל למה"ד לאדם שהפקיד אצלו המלך פקדון בכל יום ויום היה בוכה וצועק ואומר אוי לי אימתי אצא מן הפקדון הזה בשלום אף אתה רבי היה לך בן קרא תורה מקרא נביאים וכתובים משנה הלכות ואגדות ונפטר מן העולם בלא חטא ויש לך לקבל עליך תנחומים כשחזרת פקדונך שלם א"ל ר' אלעזר בני נחמתני כדרך שבני אדם מנחמין.

*The students of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai came to console him upon the loss of his son.*

*First came Rabbi Eliezer, who pointed out that although Adam HaRishon had lost a son, Hevel, he accepted consolation. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai was not consoled. Other students (Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Yosi, and Rabbi Shimon) followed and listed other personalities from Tanach (Iyov, Aharon, Dovid) who were consolable despite their tragic personal losses. The students' message was, "Rebbi, you should also accept consolation and be comforted." But Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai remained grief-stricken. Says Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, "Don't I have enough troubles of my own? Must I also be concerned with the troubles of Adam HaRishon, Iyov, Aharon and Dovid?"*

What was wrong with their message? Why was this approach counter-productive? Why was Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai not comforted? Think for a moment. The *Choleh* is already hypersensitive to pain and suffering because of his own situation. He understands only too well the anguish his family must endure because of it. Hearing about other misfortunes only adds to his own burden. The visitor doesn't realize this, because he cannot fully internalize the pain of the sick as the *Choleh* does.

The manner in which Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai is finally comforted is also very instructive. Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah relates a story in which a king gives one of his subjects a possession to guard. Day and night the man worries, lest something happen to the object. He is greatly relieved when the king finally reclaims it. Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah states, "Rabbi Yochanan, your son, too, was a possession of the King. You raised him and taught him Torah. When the King reclaimed him, he was still as pure as when you first received him." Upon hearing this, Rabbi Yochanan was consoled.

The allegory reminded Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai of his purpose in life, and accentuated to him the positives that existed. It enabled him to think of better times and connected him to positive images.



## *Keeping the Connection*

Often the *Choleh* -- cut off from his job, friends, family and responsibilities--loses connection with his life purposes. He suffers from a sense of helplessness and isolation. The *Choleh* says, "Look at what has become of me. I have no idea what is happening out there beyond my hospital bed. What's going on at work? Home? The office? I can't help out no matter how much I want to." This understandably leads to intense feelings of low self-worth.

Many visitors are hesitant to discuss business and work with the *Choleh* on the assumption that such discussion will depress him. On the contrary, these talks are most beneficial and therapeutic. It is helpful if the visitor can point out and build up the *Choleh's* past accomplishments, and reconnect him to what he was doing before the illness began. For example, work associates should discuss the business and what is happening in the office.

Neighbors should talk about local events. Family members should discuss domestic events, everyday occurrences, and even simple "*Narishkeit*". Synagogue members can share the latest chitchat and news (not *Loshen Hora*). Neighbors should talk about local events. Such discussions are not a burden; rather, they keep the *Choleh* connected to his former life, and involved in the world around him. They serve to prevent the *Choleh* from slipping into deeper feelings of isolation.

Just prior to being stricken, I had sent a draft of my

*It is helpful if the visitor can point out and build up the Choleh's past accomplishments, and reconnect him to what he was doing before the illness began.*

then upcoming Shabbos Shuva *Drasha* to my good friend Rabbi Shimshon Sherer, *Shlita*, for feedback, as I often do. As I was lying on a gurney waiting for the attendant to take me into the hospital elevator to go for some more tests, Rabbi Sherer came running up to visit with me. He told me how much he liked the way I had worked a story about Rabbi Akiva Eiger and the Nesivos into the *Drasha*. Right there he asked me to repeat the story to him, and suggested that I call him later for other suggestions.

We asked the attendant that was transporting me to stop, and with elevator doors open, I repeated the story to him. I vividly recall thinking, as the elevator descended, "He really believes that I will be giving that *Drasha*! He really believes that I will be able to resume my former life." I have tremendous *Chizuk* from that conversation to this very day.



## *Finding the Sweetness*

Let us consider the situation of a *Choleh* who is worried. After all, his own future may be uncertain, and he is anxious about how the needs of his family will be met now that he is no longer such a strong presence. A myriad of worries pile up in his mind, and combine with his feeling of powerlessness. What comfort can the visitor offer such a patient who is overwhelmed in this way? In this case, the best approach is to focus on some positive in the *Choleh's* life, despite his admittedly difficult circumstances.

Even in a tragedy, some sweetness can always be found. Hagaon Harav Gamliel Rabinovitch, *Shlita*, of Jerusalem explained this to me. In the time period when Yosef was sold by his brothers, caravans most often carried merchandise, like kerosene, that had a very foul smell. Hashem arranged, however, that the caravan that would take Yosef away would smell sweet, because it carried *Besamim*-- aromatic spices. Hashem performed this miracle especially for Yosef so that he should not suffer from the usual rank odors. Do you really suppose that at the moment that Yosef's brothers sold him into slavery, he would sit back on the camel and say, "Look how fortunate I am that this caravan is carrying fragrant spices?" What message did Hashem wish to give Yosef (and us)? The lesson is that as painful as this betrayal by his brothers was for Yosef, there was still something

thing positive to be appreciated in the event. In every tragedy there will always be a bit of sweetness--our mission is to seek out and find the *Besamim* in our situation.

A *Choleh* will benefit greatly if a visitor can help him find some 'sweetness' in his present situation. Point out good things that remain in his life. For example, a visitor might say, 'You must be so proud to see how your family has risen to the occasion.' 'Look what your friends have done for you.' 'What a tribute to you that they care so much they have done even this.' I remember clearly that when my own family and friends spoke to me about the positives in my own life, my *Hakaras Hatov* to Hashem came back into focus. This gave me the strength to handle my difficulties.

*A Choleh will benefit greatly if a visitor can help him find some 'sweetness' in his present situation.*

In my own situation, I easily found so much *Besamim*-- sweetness. The incredible strength and faith of my wife and children in the most trying times would have been enough to bolster me. Then when I heard how my children were learning in yeshiva with such devotion, as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on in their lives, gave me even more strength. But the ultimate sweetness was the *Zechus* of marrying off my children to wonderful spouses and the ability to enjoy the *Nachas* of my youngest child Zev Dov's bar mitzvah. Against all odds and against the doctors' predictions, I left my hospital bed in Mount Sinai Hospital and was able (on my own two feet!) to walk my daughter down the aisle to her *Chupa*.



## Be There

Another important way to be helpful is to allow the *Choleh* to share his feelings and concerns with you. Try to create an atmosphere where the *Choleh* feels that his conversation is really welcome. Relax your preconceived notions of what the visit should be.

You don't need to chatter constantly. Be accessible and be a good listener. Just be fully there. Simply give the *Choleh* the freedom to say what is on his mind.



## Distraction or Discussion?

There is a discussion in Masechet Yoma (75a) between Rav Ami and Rav Assi about the verse in Mishlei (12:25): If you have anxiety in your heart, 'Yisachena.' The Ralbag in Mishlei explains that one sage held that Yisachena means that the way to deal with worry is to try to suppress the worry and attempt to forget it. The other sage opined that the way to deal with worry is by *Yisachena*—talking it out. The *Choleh* will benefit from both approaches.

The first method enables the *Choleh* to forget for a while where he is and what is happening to him. I was fortunate to have good friends who now and then helped me forget my situation completely. One very memorable occasion was a Simchas Bais Hashoava that was held in the Succah at Mount Sinai Hospital. Friends brought food, music and entertainers to the hospital Succah, and for those few hours I was no longer a patient in a hospital bed, but once again, a full participant in life.

The second interpretation holds that for the *Choleh* to speak with others and share his thoughts with them lightens his burden. And it isn't only direct discussion about the person's pain or illness that is effective. There are also other ways that feelings can be shared. When I was first taken to Sloan-Kettering Medical Center, a good friend went to get a *Bracha* for me from Hagaon Horav Chaim Kanievsky, *Shlita*. The Rav gave a *Bracha* and said that at the first sign of any improvement in my condition, a *Minyan* of people should gather together and recite the prayer of *Nishmas*.

*You don't need to chatter constantly.  
Be accessible and be a good listener.  
Just be fully there.*

As soon as we noticed some slight improvement, a good friend of mine came to the hospital. He said, "Simcha, give me your hand." I could barely move some parts of my body, but I managed to move the hand somewhat. He grabbed it and pulled me out of bed, and with the help of several others, got me into a stretcher chair. They proceeded to wheel me

downstairs to the Chapel at Sloan-Kettering where there is a regular Minyan for Mincha every day.

The Minyan is mostly comprised of the very busy doctors who practice there. At the conclusion of Mincha, my friend made an announcement that we would then all now say *Nishmas* out loud together. None of the others asked why we would be saying *Nishmas* in the middle of the weekday Mincha, and nobody said he was in a rush. They all stayed to participate in the prayer for my situation and said *Nishmas* like never before, with huge *Kavana*.

This beautiful moment shows that the idea of *Yisachena* can be brought about by sharing actions together, as well as by conventional discussions. When a visitor creates lively 'golden moments' such as these, he can bring delight and happiness to the *Choleh* that touch him to the very core.

Part of genuine sensitivity to a *Choleh's* feelings is to know when he does not want to talk things over. Sometimes there are good reasons for being quiet. The Sefer Chasidim (627) analyzes a different verse in Mishlei (14:10): "*The heart knows the bitterness of the soul.*" The author asks a question: Since the heart knows its own bitterness, why say what is obvious? The verse teaches us that there are times when one should keep his pain in his heart, and not share it with others. When should that be? The *Choleh* knows when his visitor is not truly concerned with his problems. If he senses that the visitor does not want to hear about his feelings, he will certainly keep them to himself. The visitor needs to be honest with himself, as well as with the *Choleh*. The realities, the truths of our relationships with each other are present, even in the hospital room. A visit is only helpful if it comes from sincere caring.



## Strengthening the *Choleh*

As I go forward with my life, one thought gives me support as I use my experiences to help others cope with their painful circumstances. At the worst point of my illness, I was immobilized and confined to my hospital bed.

I was totally dependant on nurses and aides to assist me in every detail of my personal routines. My feeling of helplessness was intensified by feelings of embarrassment and shame at needing such help. I knew then that this aspect of my life was not going to get better quickly, and that I needed to find some thought, some idea, to help me get through it. Then, one day, a song popped into my head and I found it to be a powerful source of encouragement and resolve. I began to sing:

אשרנו מה טוב חלקנו ומה נעים גורלנו ומה יפה ירושתינו  
*'How fortunate are we and how good is our lot.  
And how sweet is our portion and how beautiful is  
our heritage.'*

Thinking of this song gave back to me the idea that no matter where we are, and no matter what shape we are in physically, we are still something very special. We all are imbued with a soul that is a piece of Hashem and we are all created in His image.



That didn't change when I became sick, and that part of me is healthy, well and whole, and will eternally be so. Nobody can take that away from me—ever! That singular thought has sustained me through all of my trials and tribulations. It is something I try to impart to others as well. For the *Choleh* who is at rock-bottom and in despair, being reminded that he is part of Hashem and that he is made in His image is transformative. At the end of the day, it is something that nothing and nobody can take away from him, despite his very real suffering.

*What then, have I learned about the Mitzvah of Bikur Cholim from my experience of needing it and then receiving it in such abundance? I would say that the Chesed in the heart of the visitor makes more of an impact than he can realize. The Choleh's life as he once knew it has been taken away from him. He is given the challenge of maintaining his completeness and his sense of self under new and trying circumstances. This self-reconstruction is a fragile process and well-wishers play a vital role in strengthening him in his struggle.*

The key, after all, is that *Bikur Cholim* and expressing the *Bracha* for *Refuah Shelama* are not simply words spoken between people in a random way. The *Mitzvah* of *Bikur Cholim*, in the context of our community's observance of the whole system of *Mitzvos*, is Hashem's way of bringing His caring and encouragement to each *Choleh*. It's more than just words. Each visit, each get-well card, each phone call and each bunch of flowers carries a message from Hashem. If we can learn to be just a little more thoughtful about how we express our good wishes, if we can tune in a little more accurately to the feelings of the *choleh*, perhaps HaKaddosh Baruch Hu's 'messages' will come through more clearly.

*I know that I have grown and learnt a great deal through this process--things that I could not have absorbed under 'normal' circumstances. All of the credit for this is due to those who came to my side during those hard times. Yeyasher Kochachem.*



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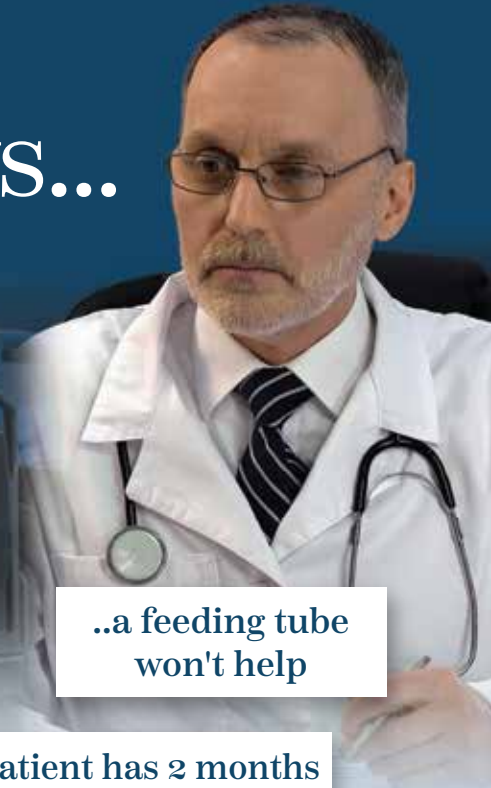
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...the care is futile

...I recommend hospice

...the patient is ready for discharge

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