

SUPER-MIZTVOT

WELCOMING GUESTS - Hachnassat Orchim

The mitzva of *Hachnassat Orchim* in its purest form consists of hosting and serving the needs of those who are destitute and have no place to eat or sleep.

In the olden days, before the proliferation of inns or hotels, a Jew who had found himself stuck in an unfamiliar village would be at the mercy of the villagers to let him in for the night. Such a person had no choice but to randomly knock on a Jewish home, potentially at any hour of the day or night, and hope that the homeowner would welcome him in to stay the night. Some authorities hold that every community has an obligation to build a hotel that guests to the city would be able to make use of.[1]

There is a misconception that today's widespread practice of inviting a family or even a few different guests to one's home for a Shabbat meal is the fulfillment of the mitzva of Hachnassat Orchim. Unfortunately, this may not be the case.

Many authorities contend that in our society, inviting friends over to our home to eat, drink, or even sleep, who could have just as well eaten or slept in their own home, is nothing more than a social gesture, and is not true fulfillment of the mitzva of Hachnassat Orchim.[2] Nevertheless, some authorities do append such social gatherings to the mitzva of Hachnassat Orchim, insisting that social bonding is to be considered a component of Hachnassat Orchim as well.

Some authorities rule that it is a fulfillment of Hachnassat Orchim to invite over a friend whose spouse is out of town, or a family whose home is under construction.

So too, inviting over newcomers to the neighborhood with the purpose of making them feel welcome is also considered to be the mitzva of Hachnassat Orchim.

Though hosting any friend or neighbor is certainly praiseworthy and may be deemed a component of the mitzva of Hachnassat Orchim, one should also

endeavor to provide for one's guests according to their financial status and expectations.

One should not accept payment for undertaking Hachnassat Orchim, though one who does so can still claim merit for the mitzva. It is especially auspicious to take in guests who are Torah scholars.

One who is truly kind will actually go out of their way to find guests who are destitute in order to show them hospitality.

One should not ask one's guests any questions or even a Dvar Torah if there is a chance that doing so might embarrass them due to their lack of knowledge.

One must escort one's guests out as they leave, especially if they may be in unfamiliar surroundings, and provide them with anything they may need for their journey. In fact, all travelers, or anyone else otherwise away from home, is to be treated as "needy" with all its usual halachic implications. It is considered especially meritorious to set aside a room in one's home specifically for guests to sleep over and use.

It is interesting to note that there are a number of halakhot whose regulations are relaxed in honor of guests.

For example, many authorities who ordinarily prohibit one to make ice cubes on Shabbat will permit doing so in the event that they are needed for guests, and by extension, to better enhance one's Shabbat.

It is also permitted to manually exert oneself to re-arrange a room in order for guests to sleep comfortably, something otherwise forbidden on Shabbat.

So too, in the event that one is pressed for time when kashering meat in preparation for cooking, one is permitted to shorten the required salting time if the meat is being served in honor of guests. It is especially important to be sure to include guests at holiday meals.

Baba Batra 93b — In Jerusalem there was a custom of displaying a flag in front of the door, thereby indicating that the meal was ready and that guests might come in and eat. The removal of the flag was a sign that the meal was finished, and that guest should cease from entering.

Betzah 25b — A guest should not drink his goblet in one gulp. This is unmannerly.

Brachot 58a — Ben Zoma used to say, “What does a good guest say?” “How much trouble my host goes through for me. How much meat he has offered? How much wine he has set before me. How many cakes he has brought before me. And all of this trouble he went through for me.” \“But an inconsiderate guest, what does he say?” “What trouble has my host gone through? I have eaten one piece of bread and a single piece of meat. I have had but one cup of wine. All the trouble the host has gone to has been only for his family.”

Iyov 31:32 — The stranger did not sleep in the street. I opened my doors to the traveler.

Rambam Hilchot Brachot 7:6 — Never embarrass your guests by staring at them.

How to Host

Hospitality—*hachnasat orchim*—is primarily fulfilled by providing for visitors from out of town. But local guests are fine, too. Since it’s such a great mitzvah, you don’t want to wait for someone to call and ask; invite them yourself, or volunteer your home to local organizations that place visitors.

Once inside, some guests are too abashed to ask for a cold drink or an extra pillow. A good host anticipates their needs.

When your guests leave, make sure to pack them some kosher food for the road. It's a mitzvah to escort them to the airport, bus or train, or at least four cubits (approximately seven feet) from your home's entrance. In fact, the reward for escorting guests exceeds the reward for everything else we afford them. It goes beyond caring for them in your town—you want to ensure they get to their next destination safe and sound.

VISITING THE SICK

The mitzvah to visit the sick extends to people of all ethnic and religious groups (*Shulhan Arukh*, Yoreh De'ah 335:1). The purpose for doing so is to alleviate suffering, evident from the rabbinic adage that the visitor relieves the ill person of one sixtieth of his suffering ([Leviticus Rabba34](#)). Aware that the presence of visitors might instead become a burden or cause embarrassment, the tradition attempts to regulate many aspects of this mitzvah.

Rules for Visiting the Sick

For example, we should wait a while before visiting someone who falls ill, so as not to give the patient the impression that the illness is grave. All but close relatives and friends are advised to postpone a first visit until the third day of the illness — unless that illness is indeed serious.

We should visit often, yet not impose a burden on the patient and his caretakers. The rabbinic tradition advises exercising good judgement regarding the time of day when we visit: in the early hours of the morning, medical professionals are usually attending to the patient, and in the evening she is usually tired (BT [Nedarim 40a](#)). Surprisingly, perhaps, we are called on to exercise discretion regarding whom we choose to visit: an ailing enemy may interpret a visit as gloating over his misfortune.

1. Visiting the Sick It is Known as Bikur Cholim

Visiting the sick is a fundamental Jewish value. The Hebrew term for visiting the sick is *bikur cholim*. **In the era of social distancing, we can perform this mitzvah over the phone or via video conferencing, expressing our care, interest, and concern, just as we would with an in-person visit.**

2. Visiting the Sick Is a Mitzvah

Your presence and smile can go a long way in helping the patient and their caregivers. Although not explicitly legislated in the Five Books of Moses, visiting the sick is considered a mitzvah (obligation).¹ So important is this act, that we enjoy both its dividends in This World and the primary reward in the World to Come.²

3. It Has No Limit

Visiting the sick is one of the mitzvahs that has no set limit; each person is encouraged to do it as much as possible, even visiting the same person several times in a single day when it makes sense.³ Those who increase the frequency of their visits are praiseworthy, provided they are actually wanted and do not become burdensome.⁴

4. Timing Matters

Visiting is not appropriate at all times. Tradition tells us to stay away in the early morning or late hours when the patient is being tended to and may not appreciate a visit. Nor should one visit at any other time they believe their presence will not be appreciated or overstay their welcome.⁵

5. G-d Himself Does It

While Abraham was recovering from his circumcision (which he performed on himself at the age of 99), God visited him. The sages tell us that this indicates God Himself visits the sick.⁶

6. It Removes 1/60th of the Illness

The Talmud teaches that the visitor absorbs one sixtieth of the patient's sickness.⁷

7. Make Yourself Helpful

A young student of Rabbi Akiva fell ill, and nobody bothered to visit him. When Rabbi Akiva heard, he himself went to visit. Seeing the deplorable state of the

young man, who was not receiving help, Rabbi Akiva himself swept and tidied the room. The grateful student exclaimed: “Master, you have revived me!”⁸

8. Be Sure to Pray While Visiting

The Talmudic narrative⁹ asserts that one who visits a sick person and prays for their recovery is considered to have given them life. Conversely, neglecting to visit and pray is comparable to manslaughter.

9. God Is With the Patient

When visiting the sick, one should not sit on a higher surface than the patient. Why? The Divine presence rests on the bed of the sick person, and it would be disrespectful to sit “above” God, so to speak.¹⁰

10. It Applies to Non-Jews As Well

Since the purpose of the Torah is to bring peace and harmony to the world, the sages see it as axiomatic that one should visit non-Jewish patients just as one visits Jewish ones.¹²

11. One should not limit visits to only those who are older and/or greater.

Those who are younger or not as great also need visiting. • If there are two sick patients, one who has many visitors and the other a few or none, one should preferably visit the latter person.

12. Opinions vary as to whether one should visit a person whom he hates.

According to some, he should avoid visiting, since it may appear as if he is rejoicing over the other’s illness. The best thing is to inform the sick person through a third party that you would like to visit him. If it is acceptable to the patient, you may visit him, for this may be the beginning of a peace process.

13. Not all patients are in a position to receive visitors.

Under such circumstances, one should inquire of the relatives whether it is okay to visit; and even then, try to keep the visit short. It is also necessary to have a sixth sense and realize when one is overstaying. In a situation where a patient is not ready for visitors, visiting can still be accomplished by staying in the foyer or hallway, and helping out family members or saying Psalms on behalf of the person.

14. Enter the room of the sick person in a positive mood.

Do not display any moods of sadness or melancholy, as this could affect the welfare of the patient. One should not bring bad tidings to a sick person.

Rabbi Yeshayahu Horowitz, the holy *Shaloh*, writes that the commandment of visiting the sick involves three components: with one's body (*beguf*), with one's soul (*benefesh*) and with one's money (*bemamon*).

1. **With one's body:** Not only should you pay a personal visit, but you should also do actual things which will uplift the spirit and the comfort of the patient. This can be accomplished in a number of ways; bringing him material to read, bringing her food (especially if the patient is in a hospital where she might avoid eating many of the foods due to *kashrut* concerns), helping raise or lower the bed, brightening up the room, etc.

When a patient is in a hospital, there are more opportunities for doing this aspect, since nurses do not always have enough time to deal with patients. [As mentioned earlier, one must use common sense, and not overstay a visit, or visit at inopportune times.]

2. **With one's soul:** by praying and saying Psalms for the sick. Don't forget to wish and bless the sick with a speedy recovery ("*refuah sheleimah*") before leaving.
3. **With one's money:** If the sick person is having financial difficulties covering his medical expenses, then one should help him. This also will help bring the sick person a bit of peace of mind.