



On the Election in Israel

A prayer for the President and the State of Israel, her advisers and counsellors and the entire nation. In a time where democratic values are under threat and in a part of the world so devoid of meaningful democratic process, there has been an open democratic election in Israel. Higher and lower political arts have been deployed, no-one has quite the outcome they would have wished but ... this is what democracy should look like. It is a remarkable success for the State of Israel – whatever the ultimate outcome of this week's election will turn out to be – and well worth praying for.

On Visiting the Sick

I don't get called on to do much visiting the sick – Bikkur Holim. I remember a wonderful member, now long-since passed away who I went to see, uninvited, in her hospital ward several years before she died. She was a woman of remarkable poise and elegance, and I saw her in an NHS hospital gown, hair askew and without makeup. She never quite forgave me. But it's a remarkable Mitzvah.

The model is ... God. Abraham, at the tender age of 99, performs self-circumcision at the end, as it were, of last week's Torah reading and God arrives to perform the sacred task of Bikkur Holim at the opening of Parshat Vayera. Rav Huna, makes the claim that a person who visits a sick person removes from them 1/60th of their interest. Rav Huna's smart-aleck students respond, "Then, let sixty people come and visit, and the person will be completely cured!" If only it were that easy. I suspect the honest answer to that smart-aleck challenge has something to do with Xeno's Paradox and something to do with inverted compound interest. But never mess with a Rabbi who is trying to encourage people do good. Rav Huna offers the mic-drop response, "Sixty people could indeed accomplish this, but only if they love the person as much as they love themselves." (Vayikra Rabba 34:1)

But my favourite Rabbinic source on Bikkur Holim comes in a moment in Talmud Sotah when Rabbi Chama son of Chanina asks how it is possible to be like God, God being like an all-consuming fire. His answer is that while pretending to be divine is dangerous, aspiring to copy God's attributes – Middot – is reachable. The examples he cites, as well as God appearing at Elon Mamre to visit the recovering Abraham, include God clothing the naked (Adam), comforting mourners (Isaac) and burying the dead (Moses). These are all entirely un-magical examples of the exercise of divinity. They are acts of humanity. They are acts of decency. Perhaps, in a week, when the news and the global challenges of feel so significant, it's helpful to wave a flag for the simpler, humane acts of divinity Rabbi Chama suggest – visiting the sick principle among them.

Shabbat Shalom

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