FROM THE DOCTOR'S DESK

FINAL CONFESSIONS

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Teshuva (repentance) is an integral part of the life of a Jew. During most of our lives, we relate to *teshuva* as an ongoing process. We even set aside certain periods of the year, like the Ten Days of Repentance, as times for contemplation, prayer and repentance. *Viduy* (confession of one's sins) and *teshuva* are so important that the Mishna (*Sanhedrin* 43b) teaches that anyone who wholeheartedly confesses his sins is assured a place in the World to Come.

Jewish law takes the emotional state of an ill person very seriously. We are forbidden to do anything that may upset his equanimity and cause him to become distraught, thereby possibly shortening his life. That is why we sometimes do not inform a very sick person of the death of a close relative. Nevertheless, the Shulchan Aruch (Y.D. 338) clearly states that a person on his deathbed should be encouraged to say *viduy*, an oral or mental confession of sins, even though we recognize that the suggestion could create emotional pain:

> A dying patient is instructed, 'Confess your sins!' And they say to him, 'Many have confessed their sins and did not die, and many did not confess, yet died; and as a reward for your confessing, [perhaps] you will live; and he who confesses his sins has a portion in the World to Come.'

It is apparent from this wording that great care is taken with regard to *how* we ask the sick person to confess, making it clear that confession does not mean that the person will die, and, in fact, may help his survival.

Several creative ideas have been developed to allow encouraging *viduy* without causing the sick person to become frightened or overly discouraged. The Shulchan Aruch qualifies the requirement of *viduy* by insisting that "All these instructions are not given to him in the presence of illiterate people, nor [emotional] women, nor minors, lest they cry and break his heart." But even with such precautions, how does one avoid causing a sick person to become scared when asked to confess?

One ingenious way was described by Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan HaCohen (Chofetz Chaim), in his classic book on the laws of showing kindness to others, *Ahavas Chesed* (section 3:3). He describes the custom in Berlin where societies were formed to visit the sick. Three days after anyone fell ill, regardless of the severity of the prognosis, the Bikur Cholim society would visit the sick person and counsel them to be sure that their financial affairs are in order, that they have forgiven and received forgiveness from others, and that they confess their sins.

The Chofetz Chaim finishes by stating: "Because this is standard procedure in these communities, the patient suffers no anxiety in arranging his affairs. Hence the same practice should be adopted in all communities."

Early commentaries on the Shulchan Aruch (Shach, *Yoreh Deah* 338, s.k. 1) advocate confession only for a deathly-ill person, because he might die suddenly without atonement. Bringing up the subject of *viduy* too soon might terrify the ill person, suggesting that the ill person is much sicker than he really is. On the other hand, the Aruch Hashulchan clarifies that we should promote *viduy* while the person is still healthy enough to fully comprehend the meaning and significance of confession. He states that confession without comprehension is meaningless.

It is to support the ideal of the Aruch Hashulchan that the Chofetz Chaim recommends that all communities create Bikur Cholim societies. In addition to all of the benefits that the societies provide in caring for the sick, he points out that without such organizations, only the sickest people can be approached to say *viduy* since people would otherwise assume that they were being approached because of their hopeless state.

Repentance and confession are not just for the dying. Dr. Abraham S. Abraham explains in the Hebrew *Nishmat Avraham* (*Y.D.* 338, s.k. 3) that a person who has any life-threatening illness, such as a mild heart attack or pneumonia, should confess. Additionally, before undergoing surgery, a person should do *teshuva*, say *viduy*, and *daven* that Hashem send him a complete recovery, because the prayers of an individual for himself are more powerful than those of others praying for him.

In summary, confession, repentance, and atonement are considered to be crucial for every person before his or her death and when in any dangerous situation. As a result, we make every effort to encourage those who are very sick and those who will be in a dangerous position to say *viduy*. Yet, as Dr. Abraham points out in the English edition of *Nishmat Avraham* (*Y.D.* 338, p. 299):

> [t]elling a patient - any patient - to confess when he is dying without at the same time taking away all hope and thus perhaps even hastening his death, is a serious problem. When and how this should be done will obviously depend on the patient and who will be the best person to tell him. Consultation with the family and a Rav is therefore absolutely essential.

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