The Visitor’s
Halachic Guide
to Hospitals

RABBI ZVI GOLDBERG
KASHRUS ADMINISTRATOR

A person visiting a hospital patient is performing the great mitzvah of bikur cholim. It is one of the mitzvos for which a person reaps benefits in this world, while the principal reward is saved for the next world. While visiting the sick, some halachic issues may arise. This article addresses these issues from the visitor’s point of view. Questions affecting the patient (such as adjusting the bed, using the call button, and asking the staff to perform tasks on Shabbos) are important issues that should be posed to one’s rabbi.

SHABBOS

Although visiting a patient in the hospital on Shabbos may present a number of challenges, this does not mean one should necessarily refrain from visiting the sick. To the contrary, the patient may benefit greatly from some visits. However, there are important issues that should be posed to one’s rabbi.

Doors – Hospitals generally have one of three types of entrance doors: manual, electric eye, or revolving.

Ideally, one should use a manual door when entering or leaving a hospital on Shabbos. If there are none available, he should wait until a non-Jew triggers the electric-eye door with his movement, and then immediately walk through the doorway. He should not linger near the door.

A manually operated revolving door does not present difficulty on Shabbos, nor does an electrically powered door that revolves continuously, since walking through such a door does not affect its operation. However, not all halachic opinions agree. Therefore, one should wait until a non-Jew activates the door and then immediately walk through the doorway.

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1 This article was written in l’ilyu nishmas the author’s father, Asher ben Zvi A”H. The idea for this article was formulated while the author visited his father in the hospital.
2 Mishna Berura 287:1 (see B.H.) discusses when Shabbos visits are appropriate. See also Responsa Tzitz Eliezer 13:36.
3 If one is uncertain if the person opening the door is Jewish, we follow the majority. Therefore, in the U.S. we may assume he is not Jewish.
4 This kind of door is not immediately obvious, but with some attention it can be seen that the revolving door stops after a while when no one walks through.
Interior doors may also be motorized. They are activated by pressing a button on the wall, or by pulling slightly on the door; they may also be controlled by an electric eye. One hospital door that was evaluated was triggered by a person standing as far as 15 feet from the door. One should be on the alert for these types of doors and walk through them only when they are already opened, as stated above.

Robots – Hospital robots (which may look like mechanized carts) are used to deliver medicine and supplies throughout the building. They navigate to their destination and can activate doors and elevators, using sensors to avoid a collision. One should avoid walking near the robots, since this will cause them to change direction, stop, or ask that one move to a different area.

Elevators - Hospitals often have many floors. Is it permissible to use an elevator on Shabbos?

Use of an elevator involves a number of issues, including:

1. Elevator doors are equipped with a mechanism which prevents them from closing when people are in the elevator entranceway. One who triggers this mechanism is transgressing a Shabbos prohibition.

2. To reach a specific floor, one generally presses a button which starts the elevator and may cause the button to illuminate.

Therefore, if at all possible one should avoid using an elevator on Shabbos. If it is very difficult for a visitor to use the stairs, he should enter the elevator immediately after a non-Jew to avoid activating the door through the electric eye. (This is not easily accomplished; due to limited space the electric eye may unfortunately be triggered.) He should not ask anyone to press a button for him, rather he should exit on the nearest level and walk to the desired floor.

In case of need, one may use a “Shabbos elevator” which stops on each floor and remains open for a short while. One should enter or exit the elevator as soon as the door opens. He should not block the elevator doorway as this will activate the electric eye.

Stairwell - The door to the stairwell may be hooked up to either an alarm or electromagnetic lock mechanism. Some hospitals and nursing homes prefer locks that incorporate electronics which alert the security personnel so they can determine whether or not to let a person leave a particular ward or floor. Pressing the bar or turning the handle on this kind of door may activate a mechanism which will sound an alarm or use electricity to unlock the door. If one needs to use such a door on Shabbos, he is permitted to ask non-Jewish personnel to open the door for him.

There may also be a security camera in the stairwell. It is best to avoid being videoed by such cameras on Shabbos, since the image is projected on a screen. In a hospital, however, it is difficult to avoid this and one is permitted to walk past the cameras.

Beds - Some hospital beds, particularly in the intensive care unit, are responsive to movement and adjust automatically. A visitor should be aware that sitting down or resting his hand on this type of bed will cause it to move.

Washrooms - Hospitals may be equipped with toilets that are controlled by an electric eye. In a situation where there is no alternative, one may use the toilet on Shabbos due to the kavod habrios (human dignity) involved. However, one may not use the sink if it is similarly controlled.

Food On Shabbos – It is permitted to have non-Jews heat up food on Shabbos for patients who are ill. However, this leniency does not apply to visitors. If a hot meal is brought for a visitor, he may not eat it until the food has cooled down to room temperature. Even if a hot meal was brought for the patient, a visitor may not partake of it until it cools down.

Regarding Kiddush, if a kiddush cup is unavailable any cup is acceptable; however, a non-disposable cup is preferred. If

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6 When he has no interest in being seen by the cameras. Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, in a personal conversation with Rav Moshe Heinemann (also cited in Orchos Shabbos 15, note 55), Rav Shmuel Vozner (Responsa quoted in Orchos Shabbos pg. 513). See Shulchan Shlomo siman 340, note 12b citing Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach.

7 Before he rises, he should cover the electric eye so that the mechanism will not be activated. It can be covered with a piece of paper, even though the paper may fall off at a later time. (See also Nishmas Shabbos 6:74(2nd)).

8 There are alternatives available to using the sink, for example using water from a pitcher or a conventional sink.

9 Shulchan Aruch O.C. 328:17 and M.B. 47. On Yom Tov, food may be heated even for a visitor.

10 This assumes the meal was only heated, but not actually cooked on Shabbos.

11 Shulchan Aruch 318:2.

there is no wine or grape juice available for Friday night, one may wash and then recite Kiddush over challah (or even a slice of bread), substituting the brocha of Hamotzie for Boreh Pri Hagafen. If bread is unavailable and the visitor cannot wait to eat upon returning home at a late hour, he may daven and eat without making Kiddush.11

There is a mitzvah to use two whole challahs for lechem mishne. Bagels or buns may be used instead of challahs. If they are sliced, they are acceptable with the following conditions: 1. The two halves are still attached, even if only slightly; and 2. When picking up the smaller piece, the larger piece remains attached and does not break off.

Shabbos Candles – Hadlakas Neiros Shabbos is an obligation that applies even to someone who is hospital bound. A patient whose spouse is lighting candles at home should nonetheless light with a brocho in the hospital room.14 A rabbi should be consulted regarding the halacha as to whether or not both the patient and an overnight visitor are obligated to light Shabbos candles. Since hospital regulations forbid the actual lighting of candles in the room, one should light an electric incandescent lamp or flashlight in the hospital room and recite a brocho.

Eruv Chatzeiros - An eruv chatzeiros16 is not needed in order to carry within a hospital.

Security - In some hospitals, especially in the emergency room, visitors may be asked to pass through a metal detector upon entering the facility. One may do so only upon removing all metal items so as not to set off the detector.

VARIOUS HOSPITAL ISSUES

Meals - A hospital may serve meals which are pre-packaged, similar to airline meals. If the meal is served in two segments, a hot and a cold portion, always check that the hot and cold portions come sealed and labeled. Furthermore, one should make sure that the portions correspond with each other; both parts should be labeled “meat” or “dairy.” It is possible that the components could be mixed, or that a non-kosher cold portion could be mixed with the kosher hot portion. This is especially true regarding bread, beverages and dessert which may have inadvertently originated from the non-kosher kitchen.17

Davening - Many hospitals have an on-site non-denominational chapel. Although it is preferable to find another area in which to daven, one is permitted to daven in such a place in the absence of religious symbols or other worshippers.

In a hospital with a religious affiliation, there may be religious symbols hanging in the patient rooms. If there is no other alternative, one may daven in the room and face away from the symbol even if it requires facing a direction other than east.18

One may not daven in the presence of human waste. If he is far enough away where no odor can be detected, and the waste is covered (even in a transparent receptable), he may daven in the room.19 The bed is not considered a covering for a pan which is placed beneath it.20 A visitor may daven in the presence of a catherher.21

Kohen - A kohen who visits a hospitalized patient may unknowingly be in the presence of a deceased patient.22 This is based on the fact that tumah travels through doorways throughout the hospital and can travel from one room to the next, even between floors.23 It is important to ascertain whether a majority of patients in the hospital are Jewish, as this would present a halachic concern. The kohen should also try to determine the presence of any deceased patients in the hospital rooms.

A kohen should visit a hospital patient only if the majority of patients are not Jewish and there is a great need to do so, e.g. when a relative is ill and family relationships must be considered24 or the patient is seriously ill and requires specific assistance from a kohen. If possible, the kohen should close the door to any room he enters. It is advisable for a kohen to discuss with a rav any potential hospital visits prior to his actual visit to the hospital.25

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11 M.B. 289:10. If he returns home that night, he should recite the kiddush he missed and eat bread. Of course, one should plan ahead and arrange for wine and challah at the hospital, if possible.

14 Mishna Berura 263:28 and Beur Halacha (Bacharim), Toras Hayoledes 38:2.


16 An “eruv chatzeiros” refers to matzoh or bread that has been set aside to allow for carrying between different areas inside a building. This is distinct from what is commonly called an “eruv”, which is constructed from poles and wire and permits carrying outside a building. In a hospital, the rooms are not considered different areas since all of the rooms are owned by the hospital and the patients are moved at the hospital’s discretion. See Beur Halacha 370:5 (ayinom).

17 Tap water in New York City hospitals may contain water insects called copepods. For a discussion of these insects, see www.star-k.org.

18 O.C. 87:3, 76:1. See M.B. 76: 3 and B.H. Siman 79 who cites a dispute if a distance of 4 amos is required, as well. In the case of a hospital room, it would seem that one may certainly be lenient.

19 M.B. 87:9.

20 Igros Moshe O.C. 1:27. He writes that it is preferable to cover it. Nishmas Avrohom (O.C. 76:9) cites a ruling from Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, that it is unnecessary to cover it.

21 Limbs, fetuses, and a goses (someone in the throes of death) are also sources of tumah for a kohen.

22 In U.S. hospitals, tumah is often contained to one floor since the law requires that fires doors and stairwell doors be closed at all times. For this reason, the morgue is not usually a concern for someone visiting a patient, since it is on a different floor.

23 Igros Moshe Y.D. 2:166, see also Y.D. 1:248. Tzitz Eliezer 16:33 takes a somewhat more lenient approach. Also, see Sefer Taharas Hacohanim pp 11, 52.

24 The rav may inquire as to the layout of the hospital. The concern is
Before entering the hospital room, one should knock lightly at the entrance to ensure that the patient is ready to receive visitors. Praying for the patient's welfare is a very important part of bikur cholim. Someone who visits and does not pray has not fulfilled the mitzvah. This may consist of a simple brocho for a refuah shelaima or a lengthy recital of tehillim, when appropriate. When davening for the patient while in his presence, he does not need to mention the patient's name.

An important goal of visiting the sick is to bring pleasure and joy to the patient. Therefore, a visitor's demeanor should not reflect signs of sadness. One should be a good listener if the patient wants to talk about his illness, but ought not to pry into the details of the illness. The visit should not be lengthy, unless one is specifically requested to stay. A long visit is likely intensified when visiting an intensive care unit, and extra care should be taken before entering this unit.

Although 'bikur' is commonly translated as 'visiting', the Sefer Maavar Tavok writes that it is derived from the word bikoret to research or investigate. A visitor should try to determine if there are any patient needs to which he can attend or even family needs including child care or coordinating meals. Advice concerning the patient's medical care should be offered only when appropriate, as very often it is not fitting to advise a patient in this regard.

The patient need not arise when a visitor enters his room, even to honor a talmid chochom. There is a dispute among authorities as to whether the patient may do so if he wishes, but he is certainly permitted to show honor by raising himself slightly.

Although it is preferable to visit someone in person, if one is unable to do so or if the patient prefers, one may fulfill the mitzvah of bikur cholim by telephoning (or emailing) the patient. He should also visit a non-Jewish person who is ill (e.g. a neighbor or co-worker) in the interest of darchei shalom. Since there is often more than one patient assigned to a room, a visitor should also acknowledge the patient's roommate.

Rav Moshe Feinstein, zt"a, penned a response dealing with people who are deaf. He concludes, "I close with a blessing that all this should not be needed, G-d forbid, that there should be no deaf among klal Yisroel, and that all the deaf people should be completely healed upon the speedy arrival of Moshiach, whom we long for every day, and then this response will remain solely for the sake of the study of Torah." We too pray that this article will not be needed. We eagerly anticipate the days of Moshiach when hospitals will no longer be needed and this article will be used exclusively for Torah study, rather than for practical use.

To comment on this email article email Rabbi Goldberg at hospitalguide@star-k.org
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Q: There is a *brocha* which is recited once a year upon seeing a newly flowering tree. I have a number of questions regarding *Birchas Hailanos*:

(i) When is the optimal time to say this *brocha*? Does the *brocha* have to be said during the month of Nissan?

(ii) What rules apply concerning the location of the person when saying the *brocha*? How far away can you be from the tree when saying the *brocha*? Can you be inside a house or other structure? Can you be in a car? Is it necessary to be at a site where there is more than one tree?

(iii) What limitations are there regarding the type of tree over which this *brocha* may be recited? Does the *brocha* need to be fruit bearing? How old should the tree be? Can the *brocha* be recited over blueberries, which are botanically classified as a shrub, or would it be preferable to recite the *brocha* over botanical trees such as a peach or apple tree? Can the *brocha* be said over a crabapple tree, which has fruit that is not palatable or over a cherry blossom tree, which clearly does not produce edible fruit? How far away can you be from the tree when saying the *brocha*?

A: (i) *Birchas Hailanos* is recited once a year during the spring when you see a tree that has started to flower. Optimally, the *brocha* should be said at the earliest opportunity upon seeing a budding tree for the first time. However, if you did not recite the *brocha* at that time you could say the *brocha* on another occasion. Some opinions state that one may recite this *brocha* only during the month of Nissan. For this reason, it is customary not to say the *brocha* before the beginning of Nissan. However, the *halachah* follows the opinion that you can also say this *brocha* during other months. Therefore, if you did not recite the *brocha* during the month of Nissan you still have the opportunity to do so. This is especially applicable in those countries where spring does not occur during Nissan. The *brocha* may be said at night if you are able to see the flowers well. Although there are sources that rule out reciting the *brocha* on *Shabbos*, the consensus of the poskim is that there are no halachic concerns with regard to reciting this *brocha* on *Shabbos*. A number of gedolim have, in fact, often recited the *brocha* on *Shabbos*.

(ii) You should be close enough to the tree to see the flowers clearly. If necessary, you may be inside a house or building when saying the *brocha*. It is preferable to stand while saying the *brocha*, although it is not necessary to do so. There are sources which suggest reciting the *brocha* over a field of trees, or at least two trees that are in close proximity. However, there is no halachic requirement to do so and one may recite the *brocha* over one tree.

(iii) The *brocha* is recited only over a fruit bearing tree. The *brocha* should not be said over a tree that is so old that it no longer produces edible fruit. However, if you do not know the age of the tree, and there is merely a concern that the tree might be *orlah*, you may say the *brocha*. You may recite the *brocha* over anything that *halachah* would define as a tree. Presumably, this would be defined as anything to which the *halachah* of *orlah* applies, and would include blueberries. You may recite the *brocha* over any tree which produces fruit that may be made edible. Therefore, if a crabapple tree produces fruit that would be processed and made into an edible food, the *brocha* could be recited over such a tree. A cherry blossom tree does not produce cherries, and, in fact, does not produce any edible fruit. This should not be confused with a cherry tree, which does produce edible fruit. Therefore, the *brocha* may not be recited over a cherry blossom tree, but may be recited over a cherry tree.

*Halachic queries regarding all topics may be presented to The Institute of Halachah at the Star-K by calling 410-484-4110 ext. 238 or emailing halachah@star-k.org*
The Gra, Mogen Avrom’ and others maintain that a mil is 22.5 minutes. Although conventional wisdom, belief and advertisement have indicated that all the mehadrin machine matzohs are “18 minute matzohs”, are all 18 minute machine matzohs created equal?

When a hand matzoh bakery claims that their matzohs are “18 minute matzohs”, from which moment are the 18 minutes measured? In a U.S. hand matzoh bakery, such as Tzelem Pupa, the 18 minute segments are measured from the time the water is poured onto the flour to knead the mixture into dough until the last matzoh reaches the oven. From the time that the flour and water are mixed, the matzoh baking team has 18 minutes to knead, roll, perforate and bake the matzohs. After 18 minutes, the entire operation stops and the cleaning process begins. When this is finished, the next 18 minute segment commences.

This is not the case with machine matzohs. In regular machine matzoh production, matzohs continue to be produced all day long with intermittent cleaning a few times a day; the machines do not stop. Mixing bowls in non-mehadrin bakeries are cleaned every 18 minutes.

This is not the case with mehadrin machine matzohs. Most mehadrin machine matzohs come from Eretz Yisroel. ‘Mehadrin’ machine matzoh bakeries stop and clean after every segment. However, they utilize both time estimations of a mil for their matzoh production. Matzoh baking can be broken down into three parts: kneading, rolling and baking, which overlap one another (see chart). It takes approximately 1 ½ minutes for the first kneaded dough to reach the roller, and an additional 2 ½ minutes of rolling and sheeting for the first matzoh to reach the oven. In total, it takes approximately 4 minutes for the first matzoh to reach the oven, and 30 seconds for the matzoh to be baked. In a machine matzoh production, the matzohs are continuously kneaded, rolled and baked for an entire 22.5 minute segment – the Gra’s estimation of a mil. However, each part of the 22.5 minute segment concludes within 18 minutes, allowing enough time for the last matzohs to be rolled and baked within 22.5 minutes (see chart).

In these bakeries, the first 4 minutes of kneading are not calculated in the “18 minute count” because the halacha states that chimutz (leavening) does not begin if the dough is constantly being worked. This is what is happening during the kneading and rolling processes; therefore, the 18 minute segment begins when the initial matzoh starts baking. The entire segment takes 22.5 minutes, which is in compliance with the 22.5 minute mil. However, each part of the segment lasts no longer than 18 minutes; hence, the bakeries call their matzohs “18 minute matzohs”. This holds true for both regular (peshutos) and shmura mehadrin machine matzohs. The only 18 minute machine matzohs that are calculated from the time the flour and water are mixed, as is done in hand matzoh bakeries, are chabura matzohs.

What are chabura matzohs? Many matzoh bakeries allow chaburos, individual groups, to rent time in a bakery to bake their own matzohs. When chaburos bake matzohs, they start calculating the 18 minutes from the time that the flour and water are mixed. Their clean-up time is longer than the regular non-chabura productions. Typically, a machine matzoh clean-up takes 10 minutes between segments; a chabura clean-up can take up to 45 minutes. When machine matzohs (such as Hadar, B’tam, Jerusalem or Yehuda) advertise on the box “18 minute matzoh”, they are using the 22.5 minute standard (unless the box states “chabura 18 minute matzohs” or Chabura brand 18 minute machine matzohs), indicating that it is an 18 minute segment from start to finish.

All of the mehadrin machine matzoh bakeries possess very reliable kosher supervision. However, the kosher consumer should realize that not all mehadrin machine matzohs are created equal.

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- The three part sequence of a machine matzoh segment:
  - Kneading: 18 min.
  - Rolling: 18 min. (1.5 min. until the rolling)
  - Baking: 22.5 min. (2.5 min. until the oven) (4 min. for the first matzoh to reach the oven)
- The only part of the segment lasts no longer than 18 minutes; hence, the bakeries call their matzohs “18 minute matzohs”. This holds true for both regular (peshutos) and shmura mehadrin machine matzohs. The only 18 minute machine matzohs that are calculated from the time the flour and water are mixed, as is done in hand matzoh bakeries, are chabura matzohs.

What are chabura matzohs? Many matzoh bakeries allow chaburos, individual groups, to rent time in a bakery to bake their own matzohs. When chaburos bake matzohs, they start calculating the 18 minutes from the time that the flour and water are mixed. Their clean-up time is longer than the regular non-chabura productions. Typically, a machine matzoh clean-up takes 10 minutes between segments; a chabura clean-up can take up to 45 minutes. When machine matzohs (such as Hadar, B’tam, Jerusalem or Yehuda) advertise on the box “18 minute matzoh”, they are using the 22.5 minute standard (unless the box states “chabura 18 minute matzohs” or Chabura brand 18 minute machine matzohs), indicating that it is an 18 minute segment from start to finish.

All of the mehadrin machine matzoh bakeries possess very reliable kosher supervision. However, the kosher consumer should realize that not all mehadrin machine matzohs are created equal.

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STAR-K Announces
New Joint Kosher Organic Program

BY MARGIE PENSAK

STAR-K and Quality Assurance International (QAI) recently announced a new joint kosher and organic auditing program, offering several advantages to the growing numbers of companies worldwide that opt for both organic and kosher certification. The rapidly rising parallel global demand for each of these certifications has created a flourishing new specialty food category, “Kosher Organic”, which meet both the strict requirements of Jewish dietary laws and the USDA National Organic Program specifications.

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Star-K 6th Annual
Kashrus Training Program
Now Accepting Applications
Star-K’s Kashrus Training Program will be held Monday, July 20 through Thursday, July 23, 2009. This intensive seminar, held at Star-K’s offices in Baltimore, Maryland, is limited to 25 students – rabbonim, kollel fellows, and others serving as klei kodesh – who have studied Yorah Deah. In addition to lectures, audio-visual presentations and a hands-on practicum, several field trips are planned.

To apply to the Star-K Kashrus Training Program, call the Star-K office for an application at 410-484-4110 and speak with Rabbi Zvi Goldberg, or go to www.star-k.com to download the application form.

Women’s Mashgicha Conference
Star-K is planning a two-day training program in our corporate office for women currently employed as mashgichos worldwide. The curriculum will include kashrus procedures, insect checking and visits to food service establishments. This program is tentatively scheduled for Fall 2009, if there is sufficient interest. Please contact our office at 410-484-4110 or star-k@star-k.org.

Star-K Kosher Certification
A non-profit agency representing the Kosher consumer in promoting Kashrus through Education, Research and Supervision.

Stark-K’s ongoing TeleKosher Conference Series for consumers is scheduled for the last Wednesday of each month at 12 Noon EST, hosted by Rabbi Zvi Goldberg. To join the conference, call 1-605-475-8590 and enter conference 528-5502#. Now also accessible online – go to www.star-k.org/telekosher for details. Brought to you by www.Kosherclasses.org.

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STAR-K 2009
PESACH GUIDE
The Pesach Guide will be available in Jewish bookstores after Purim.
A Project of Star-K Certification and Kollel Bais Avrohom Los Angeles

Subscription
$10.00/20 (USD) annually for 4 issues - US & Canada
$15.00/20 (USD) annually for 4 issues - Overseas

Kashrus Kurrents is also available via e-mail* by sending a blank e-mail to kashruskurrents-subscribe@star-k.org (must have ability to open .pdf and .zip files)
(The Star-K Passover Book, not included in this subscription, is available for purchase in Jewish bookstores during the Passover season.)

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