



SAMMY SPIDER'S FIRST MITZVAH

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Everybody knows that spiders don't perform mitzvot – spiders spin webs. But Sammy sees that Josh isn't feeling well, and could use a visitor. Luckily, Josh's friend Moti is ready to lend a hand.

JEWISH CONCEPTS

The word *mitzvah* has entered the English lexicon as a synonym for “good or charitable act.” When someone performs a mitzvah, that person is indeed doing something kind, but the word actually refers to a Jewish commandment. The Torah (the first five books of the Bible) lists 613 commandments, or *mitzvot* (plural of mitzvah). Some of these commandments require refraining from negative actions, such as stealing. Others are specific to Jewish religious practice, such as observing *Shabbat* (the Jewish Sabbath). And some are directives to behave kindly and thoughtfully to those around us, as Sammy Spider watches Moti do in this story – and then does himself.

The mitzvah Moti performs is *bikkur cholim*, caring for the sick. This important mitzvah involves taking time to visit and tend to the people in the community who aren't feeling well. In fact, *bikkur cholim* societies have existed in Jewish communities for centuries. Performing this mitzvah often entails providing a healthy meal or just stopping by for a short visit. Visiting the sick is not only considered a mitzvah – it's a pillar of *gemilut chasidim*, acts of loving kindness.

Tradition has it that when we visit someone who is sick, we actually reduce that person's suffering a little bit. In this story, Josh felt better after Moti – and Sammy! – performed their mitzvot. Sammy felt great, too. When we care for one another, we all benefit.

USING THIS BOOK AT HOME

Even young children can remember what it feels like to be ill, so they can begin to empathize with others who are sick – which makes *bikkur cholim* a great mitzvah to perform with your children. If an ill person would enjoy a child's company, here are some things to keep in mind:

Prep your child. Sometimes sick people look different from their healthy selves. If the person you'll visit will be in bed during the day, for example, discuss this ahead of time.

Take a meal or a homemade card. This concrete activity gives children a sense of purpose, and who doesn't want a tasty dish or a cute card? Small children can “sign” a card in crayon; older kids can be helpers in the kitchen.

Consider timing. Try to make your visit when the sick person is best able to receive company – and when your child is fed, well rested, and engaged. And keep it short -- kids' attention spans and energy levels do best with brief stays. Very often a short visit is all a sick person wants or needs, and your thoughtfulness -- as well as your visit -- will be appreciated.