

Lifesaving Activity That Endangers Members of One's Own Household

REGARDING A MEMBER of Hatzalah whose wife suffers with multiple sclerosis, a terrible disease that affects the immune system—he asks whether he should continue working for Hatzalah and saving lives or whether he should be concerned that he will become infected with coronavirus and thus put his wife at risk.

In several other places, I have discussed the degree to which a person is obligated to put himself at risk in order to save his fellowman. I explain that it depends upon the level of risk to which a person exposes himself in relation to the degree of the plight of his fellowman.¹ Therefore, if the risk to the rescuer is slight, and the level of danger of the person he is to rescue is acute, it is certainly a matter of piety to rescue him.

I also explain that if society has a need for the public to accept civic responsibilities, it is permitted to voluntarily undertake these duties, even if some risk is involved.² Therefore, it is permitted to become a policeman, fireman, coastguard, or mountain rescuer.

Therefore, at first glance, it would appear that it is permitted for this man to continue working for Hatzalah, in spite of the risk—and the merit of the public shall protect him and his household.

However, upon reflection, this is not in fact the case, for several reasons:

- Coronavirus is exceedingly infectious, and it is impossible to accurately assess the actual risk of infection, particularly for a member of Hatzalah who is exposed to many sick people. Medical personnel have been found to comprise a high percentage of those infected with the disease due to their treatment of the sick. Therefore, it is highly unclear whether he would be obligated to place his wife to this degree of risk in order to save others.
- Even if a person has the right to expose himself to a small degree of danger for the sake of saving others, he has no right to endanger others. Why would he be permitted to save one person at the expense of another? Particularly in this case, where this man's wife is at high risk, and if he were to infect her with coronavirus, he would place her in acute danger. What basis would there be to permit him to take this risk?
- Above all, this mitzvah can be performed by others. Though in general, this argument does not absolve him of life-saving activities—given that all Hatzalah members are equally at risk (and for this reason, they are all permitted to place themselves in slight danger)—in this case, where his wife will be at greater risk than other members of Hatzalah, it is better that this mitzvah be performed by others.

Therefore, if the situation does not appear to place him at any risk of contracting coronavirus (such as a car accident or child who has fallen from a height), he may

¹ See *Minchas Asher* 1:115 and 3:121.

² *Ibid.* 3:121.

respond and provide treatment. But if there is any concern that the person in distress is infected by the virus, he should not respond.

In fact, it would appear to be more advisable to refrain from working for Hatzalah until the danger of coronavirus has passed, as it will be difficult for him to safeguard himself completely. Given that his wife is sick, he should

refrain from the company of other people to the greatest possible extent. He should only resume his Hatzalah duties if they have a shortage of manpower and his lack of participation will endanger others. This would appear to be an unlikely scenario.

אבינו מלכנו מנע מוגפה מנחלתך.

These essays were written during various stages of the coronavirus pandemic. Facts and knowledge about this virus change daily. Torah is forever.