

Standing at Sinai...on Crutches

by Tamara M. Green

For nearly 40 years I have lived with a debilitating chronic illness—more often now with acceptance, but sometimes with an amorphous sense of unease, and even occasionally with a great deal of rage. It is not immediately life-threatening, but it is life-encompassing; and I have discovered that what is most difficult is not the possibility of dying from it, but the dailiness of living with it.

That is not to say that I have never looked into the abyss of the unknown. Nevertheless, although chronic illness has had the virtue (I suppose) of allowing me to contemplate a great many things, not the least of which is the fragility of human existence, what I want to explain are the ways in which my Jewish life has been affected by my disability, and the ways in which my disability has affected my understanding of what it means to be Jewish, both inside and outside the Jewish community.

I face what everyone with a disability or chronic illness faces: living with limitation. But committed as I am to living a meaningful Jewish life, I have found myself asking “Jewish questions” about my limitations as I shlep around on my crutches: What does it mean to be created *b'tselmo*, in Adonai's image? What does it mean to one who is disabled? The rabbis say that the body is of value because it comes from Adonai, but what is valuable about a physical existence that is marked by disability? If we all stood at Sinai at the moment of revelation, what about those of us who cannot

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stand? And what does it mean to ask for both a healing of spirit and healing of body when we recite the *mi-sh'berach*, the prayer for healing? There has always been the impulse to see my body as separate from my spirit, and yet there is the seeming inseparability of the two in this prayer. How then does one become whole, when the healing of body seems impossible?

Certainly, there is much to embrace within Jewish traditions about illness. Perhaps the most remarkable is the *mitzvah of bikkur cholim*, visiting the sick. As both a recipient and visitor, I have learned that it is, as the rabbis said, an act of *chesed*, lovingkindness, gratifying beyond measure. It is the way of embracing everyone within the community, a way of acknowledging the suffering of others. It is a way of recognizing our own fragility even while we try to give strength to another.

At the same time, however, what many traditional Jewish texts have to say about the causes and consequences of illness is too often painful, even alienating, and I have found myself continuously wrestling with them, like Jacob with the angel. And like Jacob, I have found myself limping after the encounter. I refuse to believe that illness



“THE OPEN BOOK,” 1989 BY MICHÈLE BATTUT.

is a punishment from Adonai, or that it is Adonai's way of making me spiritually aware, or that understanding is beyond the grasp of the human intellect. Certainly all of us bring our own experiences when we try to find personal meaning in the words of Torah, but what response can one have to the mixed spiritual signals that Torah seems to send to those who are less than physically whole?

One of the most powerful moments in all of Torah is the proclamation of Adonai to Moses at Sinai: “And you shall be a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). How exhilarating it is that we all have the potential to become *kohanim* (priests), to become the link between the nation of Israel and Adonai. But it is difficult to reconcile