

that embrace of spiritual inclusion with the ritual exclusion from temple service of those *kohanim* who are seen as deformed, those who have what the sociologist Erving Goffman has termed “a spoiled identity” (*Stigma*). From the perspective of one who is disabled, this dis-

activities of state and local government.” The range of duties is enormous, but perhaps the most challenging part of the job is “educating” those who are not disabled about their own perhaps unconscious perceptions of “differentness” and their often careless assumptions about the lives of those who are disabled, assumptions that allow them to suppress their fears about the “meaning” of disability. I do this because I believe, as Goffman says, that too often the disabled individual is reduced in our minds from a whole person to “a tainted, discounted one,” like the *kohen* whose perceived defects prevent him from participation in the Temple service. I do this because the ADA provides a means to call the leper back from exile. As Rosemarie Garland Thompson, the disability rights activist, puts it, those who are disabled cannot create, on their own, “a world that wants me in it.” And this is the intersection of my own disability, my Jewish identity, and my secular life.

The connection between my “Jewish” struggle with disability and my role as ADA coordinator was established by two questions I realized I had to ask myself: Could I be spiritually healed even if I never got any better physically; and if I was not to be healed physically, what did Adonai expect of me? The answers were found in two sources—one a midrash on the giving of Torah at Sinai, and the other in the teachings of Rabbi Isaac Luria, a 16th-century Jewish mystic—that not only provided me with private images of enormous healing power, but have also informed my understanding of what it means to be disabled in the here and now of 21st-century secular America.

First, the midrash: Torah says that when Moses descended from Mt. Sinai with the commandments from Adonai and found the people worshiping the Golden Calf, he smashed the tablets in anger. Although he returned to the mountain to receive the commandments once again, Talmud explains that the broken shards were not discarded, but were preserved and placed in the Ark of the Covenant along with the second set, to be carried by the Israelites everywhere. Both the shattered tablets and the whole ones were together. There must have been at Sinai some children of

Israel who, like me, were physically broken, and saw themselves, as I did, in those fragments of the tablets, and who, like me, were relieved to find themselves included in the Covenant. They, too, were standing at Sinai.

That provided an answer to my first question, but the second—what does Adonai want of me?—was more difficult. Rabbi Luria taught that the spiritual world was the product of emanations that flowed from a transcendent Adonai, who could be known only through these emanations, ten in number, wisdom, justice and the like, that were contained in vessels. But the divine light was too powerful, and all but three vessels shattered as Adonai contracted to make room for the creation of the physical world, thus allowing the spiritual to mix with the material. As a result, these divine emanations, most notably the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Presence, are in exile in this world, and the vessels that once held them are now broken. And these divine sparks of light, trapped in matter, must be released from their prison; for only with the restoration of the spiritual world to its original completeness will redemption of Adonai’s creation be possible. For those of us who are ill or disabled, the imagery of those broken vessels that have within them sparks of divine light, and the possibility that we have the opportunity to release them, is remarkably powerful and yet disturbing. The analogy to bodies shattered by disability is an irresistible one; and yet, how can we, if we are shattered physically, fulfill the obligation to set free those divine sparks, when pain and suffering, both physical and spiritual, seem to prevent us from even being aware of their presence in our lives?

Rabbi Luria offers the answer: Every person who acts in accordance with Torah brings home the fallen sparks; and Adonai, in his lovingkindness, holds out the possibility to each generation that it might be the one to redeem the world. Each one of us, then, has the possibility to bring about *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, not only through the observation of the *mitzvot* of Torah but through acts of *chesed*.

Even for those of us who are ill, there still remains, I believe, the possibility of



barment looks like a refusal of membership in that “kingdom of priests,” and a denial of participation in the sacred. At its most extreme, exclusion can lead to exile from the community itself, like the leper who is forced to live outside the camp of the Israelites, and to call out to all that he is unclean (Leviticus 13:45).

I think it was both this struggle to make “Jewish sense” out of what had happened to me and the recognition that I was increasingly “living with limitation” that led me to accept the position of ADA coordinator at Hunter College almost 15 years ago. The Americans with Disabilities Act “prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in employment, transportation, public accommodation, communications, and