



BROKEN TABLETS/ SCATTERED LIGHT

by Tamara M. Green

For nearly 30 years I have lived, sometimes with detachment, sometimes with an amorphous sense of unease, and sometimes with a great deal of rage, but always with a debilitating chronic illness. It is not immediately life-threatening—although there have been moments when it has been—but it is life-encompassing; and one of the most painful lessons I have learned from this illness is not the possibility of dying from it, but the dailiness of living with it.

That is not to say that I have not thought about what it means to look continually into the abyss of the unknown, and to feel myself losing my balance at the edge. Nevertheless, chronic illness has allowed me to contemplate many other things, not the least of which are the ways in which my Jewish life has been affected by my illness, and the ways in which my illness has affected my understanding of what it means to be Jewish. Certainly, I have always known that to be a Jew was to know about the suffering of a people, but in what ways can Judaism teach about the experience of a single life? What can it mean to me to live *Jewishly* with my illness?

One of the first things I think of is the remarkable *mitzvah* of *bikkur cholim*, visiting the sick. Although rabbinic discussions focus not on the sick person but on the performance of the *mitzvah* by those who are not sick, I am moved, both as a recipient and an agent, by the centrality of this *mitzvah* in Jewish tradition. It is a profound act of *chesed*, lovingkindness, that is beyond measure.

Judaism is a religion whose spiritual center rests in concrete acts: Torah is always telling us *what* to do, and certain deeds are singled out by our ancient sages as having special importance. According to Talmud, one of the most important ways that we can imitate *Adonai* is to perform acts of lovingkindness toward creation, and at the top of this lovingkindness list is the act of visiting the sick. It is a way of embracing everyone within the community, a way of acknowledging the suffering of others. When I am in the hospital, feeling alone, a visit from a friend not only breaks that personal isolation, but brings the Jewish embrace of my entire community. It is an embrace that recognizes my suffering, and that declares I am not forgotten.

It is also true, however, that what traditional Jewish texts have to say about the causes and consequences of illness is often painful, even alienating, to hear; and I have found myself struggling angrily with it. I hate the harsh and even punitive outlook toward illness expressed in Torah—Miriam, for example, who is stricken with a skin disease because she speaks badly of Moses's wife—and I am hurt as

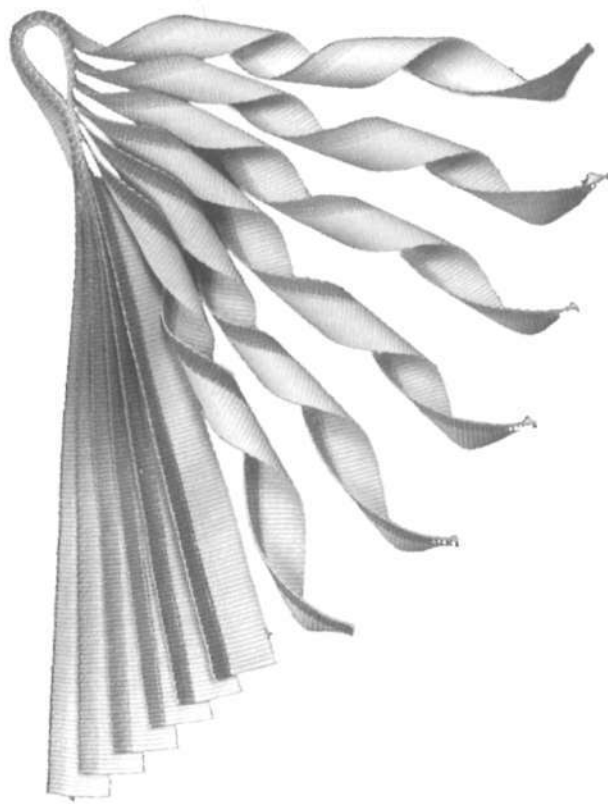
*Can I be spiritually
healed even if I
never get any better
physically?*

well by stories that are predicated on the belief that *Adonai* can choose to heal. I know that we are supposed to feel the presence of the miraculous when the Prophet Elisha brings a child back to life through the breath of *Adonai* that is within him, but I can only think, "Why does *Adonai* save some and not others?"

What sense can I make of those Torah portions that seem only to exacerbate my misery? The portion *Thazria*, for example, lists all the outward signs of leprosy in exacting clinical detail and declares that after the diagnosis of leprosy is made, the leper's "clothes shall be rent, and the hair of his head shall go loose, and he shall cover his upper lip, and shall cry, Unclean, unclean. All the days wherein the plague is in him, he shall be unclean; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall be his dwelling."

The isolation of the leper is complete and absolute and it frightened me, for he is forced to leave the camp, to live apart from the community. How must he feel, going through the rituals of mourning for himself, having been forced to declare himself before the entire community to be unclean? Judaism is supposed to be grounded in our collective responsibility toward *Adonai* and for one another, is it not? How, then, at such a time, can we cast out someone who is suffering? What happens to the *chesed* that we are supposed to feel? What has happened to *Adonai's chesed*? Are we so horrified and so frightened by what has happened to the leper that we must banish him from our sight? Does the leper's suffering arouse in us feelings that we cannot tolerate? Was it possible that this banishment could ever happen to me? Was I, somehow, like that leper?

There are texts, too, that while not dealing specifically with illness seem to stand as a reproach to me. Everywhere I read that we are created *b'tselmo*, in *Adonai's* image. What



about me? If I was created in *Adonai's* image, does that mean that *Adonai* also walks with crutches, has difficulty breathing, and suffers from digestive trouble? *Ha-neshama lach v'ha-guf pa'alach*, "The soul is Yours, and the body is Your handiwork." Why, then, did *Adonai* do such a lousy job with my body? And, finally, if I dared to look over the edge of the abyss and speculate about the afterlife, I found that the rabbis say that the body is of value because it comes from *Adonai*, and therefore resurrection affirms that our physical existence is valuable in God's eyes. What could be valuable about this body of mine?

I have made a little list of the various Jewish meanings of illness that I sometimes recite to myself when I'm feeling trapped by my body and despairing:

1. *My illness is a punishment from Adonai.* If illness is a punishment, what did I do that was so terrible; and could I be forgiven?
2. *My illness is a way of making me spiritually aware.* What good will spiritual awareness do me if the pain con-

sumes me? And since I have not gotten any better, does that mean I haven't learned whatever lesson *Adonai* wanted to teach me? What happens if pain becomes a way of destroying faith, not strengthening it?

3. *Adonai loves the tears.* When *Adonai* says to King Hezekiah in *Isaiah*, "I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears," my only response is: what about *my* tears? Besides, if *Adonai* is full of compassion, how could *Adonai* love my tears?

4. *Understanding is beyond the grasp of the human intellect.* I would like to give understanding a shot; after all, I have a Ph.D. But if I concede that the plans of *Adonai* for the creation are beyond my comprehension, what hope can I have of making sense of what has happened to me?

5. *Adonai controls the world, but not completely.* If *Adonai* created the world, how could it be possible that the Divine Power does not control everything in the creation? Why should I turn to *Adonai*, if *Adonai* can do nothing about my pain? Or does *Adonai* just heal some of us and not others? And why? I would like to believe that *Adonai* is just and *Adonai* is omnipotent; but, as more than one theologian has pointed out, one of these assumptions must be false in the face of human suffering.

Theology and texts aside, there is still the question of finding solace in the pleasurable rhythms of a life lived Jewishly. In truth, these rhythms *are* pleasant, but periodically the spiritual complication of physical illness overwhelm me. Here are some random memories:

- I love going to synagogue—especially my synagogue, where we have worked hard at creating a Jewish community. And yet, even there, I sometimes find myself distressed. I know that it really doesn't matter if I sit when

STORIES THAT HEAL

KITCHEN TABLE WISDOM: STORIES THAT HEAL

by Rachel Naomi Remen

(New York: Riverhead Books, 1996, \$22.95)

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen believes deeply in the healing power of telling stories. During the early years of her career, she practiced modern medicine "by the book," and believed, as she had been trained to do, that her job was to cure illness and not the individual, and that the death of a patient was the result of professional failure. What she finally came to realize, through her work at the Esalen Institute, her study of Buddhism, and the remembered stories that her Orthodox Jewish grandfather had told her as a child, was that the healing of the body was inextricably entwined with the healing of the soul.

In *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal*, Dr. Remen, now a psycho-oncologist and professor of medicine at the University of California, has collected the stories that she and her patients have retrieved or constructed as they confronted life-threatening illness. What Dr. Remen has discovered in her work is that the most meaningful stories we tell about ourselves are the ones hidden in the cracks and crevices of consciousness—half-remembered moments of joy or pain or anger or acceptance whose meaning extends beyond the words spoken and the images evoked: the soaring eagle in the dream of a woman with breast cancer; a doctor transformed by the clear-eyed gaze of an infant he had just watched come into the world. They reach back inside us, into some secret place, and somehow connect to our spiritual core, helping us find the strength to deal with what is.

—T.G.

IN REMEN'S OWN WORDS:

Thirty-five years ago, I was one of a few women in my training program and my male colleagues generally assumed that, as a woman, I had greater comfort and skill in meeting the emotional needs of patients. . . . I would find another doctor standing there ill at ease, who would say something like, "My patient is crying. . . . Can you come?" I was no more comfortable than he in such situations but I realized early that this was part of my ticket to acceptance and so I would go and listen while someone shared with me their concerns and their experience of actually living with the disease we had diagnosed.

At first I was surprised that people with the same disease had such very different stories. Later I became deeply moved by these stories, by the people and the meaning they found in their problems, by the unsuspected strengths, the depths of love and devotion, the rich and human tapestry initiated by the pathology I was studying and treating. . . .

These stories engaged me at another, more hidden point. I too suffer from an illness, Crohn's disease, a chronic, progressive intestinal disease which I had developed at the age of fifteen. So for me these conversations eased a certain loneliness. . . . I listened to human beings who were suffering and responding to their suffering in ways as unique as their fingerprints. Their stories were inspiring, moving, important. In time, the truth in them began to heal me.

—From *Kitchen Table Wisdom*



REMEN

everyone else stands, but when we sing *Lkba Dodi* on Friday night, I sometimes cannot rise with the rest of the congregation to welcome the Shabbat. The image of turning to the door and bowing in greeting to the Shabbat Bride is so powerful, but I can't do it.

- From the time I learned the words as a child, my favorite Shabbat song has been *Adon Olam*, for *Adonai* is revealed not "merely" as the ruler of the universe but as one who brings comfort and provides shelter for each one of us. But one Shabbat, I felt my eyes fill with tears as I sang the words, *v'bu Eli v'chai goali, v'tsur chevli b'es tsara*, "He is my God and my life's redeemer, my refuge in distress." How could I sing these words, when I felt that they had nothing to do with me?

- One Shabbat morning, when the physical pain was particularly bad, I wondered whether I could recite a *mi sheberach*, a prayer of healing, for myself. I'm always sorry that I didn't have the nerve that day.

- There were many years when I was grateful that I had made it to another Rosh Hashana, another New Year, but one year, after a summer spent mostly in the hospital with a series of devastating infections, the petitionary prayer that begins, "On Rosh Hashana it is sealed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who shall live and who shall die, . . . but penitence, prayer and good deeds can annul the severity of the decree" filled me with dread. Perhaps I hadn't prayed enough, repented enough, performed enough good deeds the year before: is that why I had been so sick?

- While preparing for *Pesach* one particularly lousy year, I was struck by the notion that my illness was like *chametz* that no amount of cleaning could get rid of. At the seder, I felt resentment that, unlike the ancient Israelites, I would never be liberated from my burden. As I dipped my finger in the wine to count off the ten plagues, I felt enormous pity for myself—as if the plagues had been sent by *Adonai* not against the Egyptians but against me.

Considering the amount of education that had been poured into my head and the amount of time I had spent in front of a college classroom teaching, it

WITNESS YOUR SUFFERING

The answer to being at peace with suffering is in the mind. . . . There is no need to avoid the suffering. Witness, accept it, and go on with the rest of your life. What you may find is that though suffering is universal, attachment to suffering differs with individuals. What is love to one may be fear to another. What is food for you today may be bad for you tomorrow. . . . So in suffering, as in pleasure, as in all areas of life, there is no need for judgment. There is only the acknowledgment of the moment and the feeling.

There are times when you may have suffered and, as a result of stepping outside the suffering, were able to view it from another perspective. . . . There are also times when an illness does not leave totally, and you may be challenged to find a way to live with it, without being attached to its cure or dismissal. Making peace with suffering assists your spiritual and emotional growth and develops within you attributes of courage, endurance, acceptance, and flexibility. The essence of suffering does not lie in the ability to circumvent it; it lies in the ability to be at peace within the adversity. . . .

Observe yourself fully experiencing life, not hiding from it, but rather allowing the full gamut of feelings and possible situations. Accept what is. Begin loving your limitations as though they were a gift of a new perspective, wrapped in a beautiful package that is now available to you. In the kaleidoscopic view of life, nothing is isolated; all opposites incline towards each other. While experiencing life fully, you will notice that moments of bliss are hidden in the pain, moments of joy are hidden in the suffering, forms of life are hidden in death, and eternity is hidden in impermanence.



LABOWITZ

From Miraculous Living: A Guided Journey Through the Ten Gates of the Tree of Life by Rabbi Shoni Labowitz (Simon & Schuster, 1996, \$23). Excerpted by Susan Schnur.

As a result, seven divine emanations (most notably the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Presence) are in exile in this world, the vessels that once held them 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.

It seems like an impossible task, but Rabbi Luria revealed the way to bring about the repair of the world, and in his solution I find an answer to my question, "What does *Adonai* expect of me?" Every person who acts in accordance with *Torah* brings home the fallen sparks; everywhere in the world a spark of the Divine Presence waits to be found, gathered and restored; and *Adonai* holds out the possibility to each generation that it might be the one to

redeem the world. Each one of us, then, has the potential to bring about *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, not only through the performance of the commandments of *Torah* but through acts of *chesed*, lovingkindness. I have come to realize that spiritual repair, both of myself and the world, is possible. I may not be able to do much about the broken vessel that is my body, but certainly I know that I, like the broken set of tablets, am included in the Covenant, and that I, like all the rest of us, am blessed with the task of gathering up the scattered light. It's a task that I'm still working on. ■

Tamara Green is editor of "The Outstretched Arm," the journal of the National Center for Jewish Healing. She is Professor of Classics at Hunter College.