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**OPENING CONTEMPLATION**

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*'Im ani kan, hakol kan*  
If I Am Here, All Is Here:  
A Contemplation  
on "Defects" and "Wholeness"

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, MA

**SUMMARY.** The author provides an understanding that the community is incomplete without the presence and participation of people with disabilities. "The Torah was not given to angels. We are all of us blemished; human wholeness does not come from some elusive perfection, but rather from the radical act of taking hold of our imperfections and offering even them." The Torah reminds us of an insistence on a community that includes

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Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson is Dean, Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, and Vice-President, University of Judaism. Rabbi Artson is author of *The Bedside Torah* (McGraw-Hill). He writes a free weekly email Torah commentary, "Today's Torah." Address correspondence to: (E-mail: bartson@uj.edu).

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all of its members—that makes none of them invisible, that asks none to step outside. doi:10.1300/J095v10n03\_02 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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How do we measure human worth? What constitutes wholeness or greatness? And, by way of contrast, what constitutes a defect, an imperfection that renders another person less than complete? These questions intrude when we consider the lives of people with disabilities. They intrude as well when we peer into the depths of our own hearts and face our inner selves in the naked light of honesty. Disability disrupts the images of perfection that surround us and cry out: are we really good enough to do the tasks at hand? Are we pure enough? Are we holy enough? Has the Torah gone through our beings to transform us into someone sufficiently decent? Won't our shortcomings become immediately apparent, and immediately visible?

I'd like to create room to rethink the way we conceive our challenges, our imperfections, our embodiment, through the light of Torah. In addressing who is permitted to bring a sacrifice in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, the Torah imposes the following restriction: *Ish mizeracha l'dorotam asher yiheyeh bo mum, lo yikra lehakriv lechem l'elohav; ki chol ish asher bo mum lo yikrav*—"No one of your offspring throughout the ages who has a defect—a *mum*—shall be qualified to offer food to God; no one who has a *mum*—a defect—shall be qualified" (Leviticus 21:17).

I have been schooled in the historical method of religious study. My first defense against troubling verses in the Torah is to quarantine them securely behind a historical context, so let us begin our contemplation using that approach. The Kohen in the Temple is understood to be a symbol of perfection. Because the Temple ritual is physical, the Kohen's perfection must also be physical. And that perfection is understood by the biblical text as *shleimut*—as wholeness. Therefore, the Kohen can't be missing any body part, because he has to literally embody that wholeness in the presence of God. Indeed, as the Torah goes on to state, *ach el ha-parochet lo yavo'u, v'el ha-mizbeach lo yigash, ki*

*mum bo*—"One who has a defect shall not enter behind the curtain, nor come near the altar" (Leviticus 21:23).

But history won't remove the problem for most of us. Are we then saying that we can't draw near to God, we cannot serve on behalf of the community, if we have a *mum*, a defect? Is there anyone among us who is perfect? Is there anyone—anywhere—who doesn't, in fact, manifest not one *mum* but many? Is it possible that only those who are perfect are capable of serving God and of serving each other? Certainly, on a literal level, this has not been true in Jewish life. Our father Jacob "limped" his way into greatness. Moses spoke what are surely history's greatest orations with a speech impediment. The Talmud is filled with great figures—Nahum ish Gamzo, Rav Sheshet, and others—who, with their physical blemishes, perhaps because of them, went on to attain spiritual greatness. And then, theologically, certain it is that God is the only one who is perfect. Can it be, then, that only God can serve?

The Torah raises a question in the book of *Devarim*. *Shichet lo? Lo! banav mumam*—"Is corruption then God's? No, God's children are the ones who are blemished" (Deuteronomy 32:5). Rabbinic genius turns the verse around: "*Af al pi shehem m'laim mumim, kruim banim*—even though they are full of imperfections, they are still God's children" (*Sifri Devarim*, Parashat Ha'azinu, Piska 3).

We are—all of us—God's children, blemishes, defects, imperfections and all, and we cannot afford to allow human shortcomings or disabilities to prevent us from taking the responsibility that is ours to do what good we can, to glorify Torah and to testify to God's sovereignty as we might. So I'd like to try to offer a different percolation of that initial verse in *Parashat Emor*. A *mum* is that lack which makes us feel incomplete. It is the part of some imaginary whole. I would like to propose, then, that wholeness does not mean physical perfection. Indeed, *shleimut* is not perfection of any kind. *Shleimut* means serving God with all our being, with the entirety of who we are, with leaving no part of ourselves outside of the divine service—*bechol levav'cha, uvechol nafshecha, uvechol meod'cha*, "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5). God doesn't demand of us that we apportion ourselves into little pieces, some parts of which are kosher, some parts of which are acceptable, some parts of which may be public, and the rest must be hidden away. It is that hiding which is the *mum*, and a person with such a *mum* cannot serve the Holy One, and cannot stand before an imperfect community pretending to be perfect.

One can serve the Eternal only with the wholeness that comes from imperfection. With one's entire being, both positive traits and negative;

as Rashi says, *bishnei yitzarecha*, "with both your impulses." We can serve the Lord only if our entire history, our entire life, even our special needs are brought with us into the divine service. Only if our minds and our hearts and our souls are engaged passionately in the works that we do and, as we remind ourselves each *Kol Nidrei*, only if we bring with us our entire community—not just the saints but the sinners too, not just those with special needs, but those not yet with special needs.

Perhaps, then, the wholeness to which the Torah alludes is the willingness to stand in our entirety—warts and all, defects and all, special needs and all—and to offer them to God as a sacred service. Perhaps what the Torah is reminding us, then, is an insistence on a community that includes all of its members—that makes none of them invisible, that asks none of them to step outside. Perhaps only that community is a community fit to offer sacrifice that God will accept.

### WE ARE CHARGED, THEN, WITH A SIMPLE BUT AWESOME TASK

Bring our entire being to the service of God and our fellow creatures. Leave no part of ourselves outside. Leave no piece of ourselves invisible. Be passionate in the service we offer. The Talmud reminds us, *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu liva bei*—"God wants the heart." Let us live in such a way, building communities that are welcoming and accessible, so that those we live, learn, and work with will know that they, too, are precious, and that each one of them, because of their imperfections, are truly God's children. Let us show them not to postpone encountering Torah, living mitzvot, and rejoicing in God's love until the day that they are perfect—such a day will never come. And besides, the Torah was not given to angels. We are all of us blemished; human wholeness does not come from some elusive perfection, but rather from the radical act of taking hold of our imperfections and offering even them. *Be-chol derakhekha da'ehu*—"in all your ways, know God" (Proverbs 3:6).

It is recorded in *Massekhet Sukkah* that Hillel has the audacity to speak on God's behalf. I am going to take my cue from him and muster the audacity to mistranslate Hillel. God (if not Hillel) would want it that way. "*Im ani kan, hakol kan*: 'If I am here,' says God, 'all is here.' " Who knows, but that for God to be truly present, *our* all—including the all of those with disabilities—must also be truly present.

## Standing at Sinai...on Crutches

by Tamara M. Green

**F**or 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 dailliness 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

*Tamara M. Green teaches at Hunter College and was a founding member of the Jewish Healing Center. This article is adapted from Healing and the Jewish Imagination: Spiritual and Practical Perspectives on Judaism and Health © 2007 by William Cutter. Permission granted by Jewish Lights Publishing, [www.jewishlights.com](http://www.jewishlights.com).*

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,” 1969 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

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-



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

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

repair and restoration, of both ourselves and our world. Healing may be possible, even if we cannot be made whole again. By fulfilling the commandments of Torah, we are able to restore our own spiritual structure, for our actions have both an interior and exterior effect: everything we do reacts somewhere and somehow, for ourselves and for others.

What have these images done for me? First of all, the shattered tablets that have their place in the Ark of the Covenant have helped me to see that I don't have to be physically whole to be part of the community of Israel. Secondly, 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 can help to gather up the scattered light everywhere that I can. It's something I'm still working on, both for myself and for the wider world, because I would like to think that the regulations of the ADA and the words of the *mi-sh'berach* prayer are part of the same message that is sent from Adonai to all of us.