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How Long Will You Hide Your Face From Me? By Professor Tamara M. Green



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When I first became ill more than 30 years ago, it was unclear what course the disease might take. I spent months in the hospital, composing scripts in my head: the best possible scenario had, of course, the happy ending of a miraculous cure; but barring that, I was willing to settle for a remission that would last 60 or 70 years. I could barely bring myself to envision a tragedy of increasing pain and helplessness, followed by death at an impossibly early age. It turned out that there was another yet another scenario, one for which I had not learned my lines: the melodrama of an ongoing struggle against an illness that refuses, as it were, to follow the script.

There are very few lessons that I have learned from living with chronic illness, but what I do know is that pain and suffering have not ennobled me in any way. As I have been known to say, it has at times merely made me very bitchy, for pain has a way of blotting out every emotion except anger. Sometimes the anger has an easy target: doctors, when I am feeling awful, and there's nothing much to be done – or my body, when I realize that once again it has betrayed me. But truth be told, that anger dissipates when I am feeling better. Sometimes it is the anger born of frustration, tinged with what I know is useless regret about what has happened to me. But I recognize that I cannot live thinking about what might have been, and in my better moments I am able to acknowledge that there have been lots of very good times along the way.

But the anger that is most difficult to confront comes when I seek spiritual comfort and cannot find it. I do not believe that there is any cosmic reason why I am ill. I do not believe that I am being punished for some moral failure. I do not believe that *Adonai* wishes to chasten me or test my spiritual strength. Yet, there are times when although I am afraid that I cannot summon the will to “hang in there,” when I long to know that “though I walk a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm, for You are with me,” I feel only that *Adonai* is very far away. It is at those moments that I understand so painfully the angry cry of the psalmist: “How long, *Adonai*, will you ignore me forever? How long will you ignore me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?... Look at me, answer me, *Adonai Elohai*.” Like him, I call out “*Hineni*. Here I am, *Adonai*. Where are You? From where will come my help?”

There are no quick fixes for this kind of anger, for it is a breach that is not easy to repair. But somehow, even full of rage, I know that I must try, no matter how painful the attempt. What I have come to understand is that the answer to my call for help may come from unexpected places and in unlooked-for ways. It can come from being at a Shabbat service. While reciting the *mi'sheberakh* for a friend who is ill, I feel overwhelmed by the power of prayer. It can come from struggling with a text. I take courage from Job's rejection of the simplistic pieties of his comforters, and from his calling *Adonai* to account for his suffering. It can come from a telephone call from my sister or brother. It is then that I realize that *Adonai*'s presence is felt through the connections we make with those we love. It is there that I see the face of *Adonai*.