

Rosh Hashanah Day I: How to be a Lamed-Vavnik in a Troubled World

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Have you heard the Yiddish word, kaynahoreh? (Keep away the evil eye). My great-grandmother used to say that all the time that she mentioned something good.

Which reminds me of a story:

Mr. Finkelstein is called as a witness in a trial.

"How old are you?" asks the D.A.

"I am, kaynahoreh, ninety one."

"Excuse me? What did you say?"

"I said, I am, kaynahoreh, ninety-one years old."

"Sir, the clerk can't type unusual words, please just answer the question with no embellishments," says the D.A. "I ask you again, How old are you?"

"I told you. Kaynahoreh, I'm ninety-one."

The D.A. is really getting annoyed. The judge is also losing his patience. He instructs, "The witness will answer the question simply and plainly or be held in contempt of court!"

The defense lawyer rises and says, "Your Honor, I think I can resolve this. May I ask the question?"

"If you can get this trial moving, please, be my guest."

"Mr. Finkelstein, let me ask you, kaynahoreh, how old are you?
you?"

Mr. Finkelstein replies, "Ninety-one!!"

According to Jewish tradition, the world, or more precisely recorded history, is now (kaynahoreh!) 5780 years old. On Rosh Hashanah we celebrate the birthday of world, the beginning of a New Year full of possibilities. But in recent years it has seemed more like the fate of the world was hanging in the balance. Last night we spoke of climate change and environmental degradation. We are struggling with other big issues like racism and prejudice, gun violence, and a worldwide refugee crisis. While technology advances by leaps and bounds, human development and interpersonal ethics often seem to proceed by baby steps, and we wonder how long humanity's saga on the planet can be sustained under these conditions.

But the world has always been full of troubles and challenges. Our ancestors, too, asked: How does this world keep going? Part of their answer was the legend of the lamed vavniks, the thirty-six blessed humble souls whose merit keeps society from falling apart.

Have you met someone whose character and deeds were so exemplary that just being around them raised you to a higher level, made you want to do a little better? Hopefully we all know at least one or two people who seem to be living their entire lives on a different plane. Take a moment to think of someone you know who fits this description of a humble, gentle, person who lives so purely by their ideals. Now I invite you to take just a minute to share with someone near...

Our tradition is full of legends about such lamed-vavniks, the humble, hidden saints who secretly sustain the entire world. We first hear of it explicitly in the Talmud [Sanhedrin 97b and Sukkah 45b], where the sage Abbaye is quoted as saying, “The world must contain not less than 36 righteous individuals in each generation who greet the Shekhinah’s presence each day,” (the Shekhinah meaning God’s presence in the world). His proof text is from the biblical book of Isaiah 30:18, *Ashrei kol hokei lo*, “Happy are all those that wait for Him.” (The word “for Him” in Hebrew, *Lo*, spelled lamed-vav, equals 36 in gematria, Hebrew numerology, and that is the official source of the number of the hidden saints.)

The number thirty six itself is symbolic, meaning twice the value of “Chai” or life (18 in Hebrew numerology). The idea of a few righteous people saving the world may derive from the book of Genesis, when Abraham asks G-d if to spare the cities of Sodom and Gemorrah as long as 50 or even 10 righteous individuals can be found. Of course, as we say, “two Jews, three opinions.” Naturally the Talmud contains a number of different views on the true total of the hidden righteous. Thirty six might not do it. Perhaps there are 18,000 righteous, based on the book of Ezekiel. Perhaps there are about 45, and they certainly include gentiles as well as Jews. The idea of hidden holy people is almost universal, though other religions may call them saints or bodhisattvas.

How do the Lamed Vavniks keep the world going? Some say by the practice of compassion. As Dr. Naomi Remen's relates in her popular book, *My Grandfather's Blessing*. Her grandfather told her as a child: "Anyone you meet might be one of the thirty-six for whom God preserves the world...It is important to treat everyone as if this might be so... [The Lamed-Vavniks] respond to all suffering with compassion. Without compassion the world cannot continue. Our compassion blesses and sustains the world."

The poignancy of this endless compassion was expressed by French novelist Andrew Schwarz-Bart in "The Last of the Just," his post Holocaust novel about generations of the Levy family, a family of lamed-vavniks. He writes of the pain that can result from having the compassion of a true lamed-vavnik:

"Rivers of blood have flowed, columns of smoke have obscured the sky, but surviving all these dooms, the tradition has remained inviolate down to our own time. According to it, the world reposes upon thirty-six Just Men, the Lamed-Vov, indistinguishable from simple mortals; often they are unaware of their station. But if just one of them were lacking, the sufferings of mankind would poison even the souls of the newborn, and humanity would suffocate with a single cry. For the Lamed-Vov are the hearts of the world multiplied, and into them, as into one receptacle, pour all our griefs."

But what can the tradition of the lamed-vav mean to us today? Is it just a quaint folk tale, or is there something there to inform and inspire us? I think that we have great difficulty today feeling that our deeds have any impact. Our ancestors were focused on their local communities and saw the impact of their deeds before their eyes. Today we know about things going on around the globe almost as they happen. Daily we hear of suffering and destruction around the world. Our expanded knowledge can make us feel responsible for much more than our ancestors, while we are powerless to make a difference on such a grand scale.

The idea of the Lamed-Vavniks offers hope that the individual, at least the morally outstanding individual, can somehow affect the world. This is a very Jewish concept. According to the Talmud, we don't really know the weight of our every individual act on the greater whole. In his laws of Teshuvah/Repentance Maimonides tells us to imagine all the deeds of the world in a giant scale balanced evenly between good and bad, and our next deed may be the one that tips the scale. The legend of the lamed-vavniks hints that little people and little deeds can add up to great movements and great changes. When I gaze at the ripples on Swan Lake at Rockefeller State Park Preserve, touching other ripples and spreading out, I'm reminded that one deed may resonate far beyond the moment, far beyond our sight (as others did for us). In the words of Mother Theresa, "We can't all do great things, but we can do small things with great love."

It used to be *chutzpah* to consider oneself a lamed vavnik. But with the state of the world today, I think that we have to take another approach. We should look to the models of those we know who live those extra-righteous lives, and try to take one step in their direction. In order to heal our planet, we need to do more than advance our technology. We need to develop our character, our compassion, our hearts and souls. We need to do “double Chai,” to live our lives at a higher level.

Here’s an example of one person who set out to act like a lamed-vavnik. We learned that the sage Abaye said the lamed vavniks, “greet the presence of the Shekhinah each day.” A contemporary psychotherapist wrote how he was given the impossible task of treating criminals in a very dismal and hopeless jail setting. The only way that he could cope was by following the model of the lamed-vavnik, striving to greet the Shekhinah in every person. He learned that according to Talmudic tradition, the Shekhinah is the feminine, compassionate aspect of G-d, that embraces repentant sinners, comforts those in pain and lifts up the lowly. The therapist entered the jail, not with a goal of employing the most brilliant therapeutic tactics, but with the intention of being truly present in the most painful situations, of seeing his clients as tragically damaged human beings who were nonetheless formed in G-d’s image. His work went from being a seemingly impossible challenge to being “one of the most profound learning experiences” of

his life. And who knows how many people in the world were ultimately affected because this one man practiced compassion?

Contemporary American Rabbi Rami Shapiro theorizes that we all take turns being the *lamed-vavniks*.¹ He says, “The tipping point for maintaining human life on this planet is thirty-six people practicing the sacred art of lovingkindness at any given moment. These need not be the same thirty-six people at each moment, however. I believe that people step into and out of the *lamed-vavnik* role. . .Right now, at this very moment, there must be thirty-six acts of lovingkindness occurring on the planet, or the collective weight of human ignorance, fear, anger, and greed would crush humankind. The fact that . . .the world is still functioning means that someone, or rather 36 someones, are carrying out the *lamed-vavnik* obligation.

“But what about the next moment? Can you really afford to let . . . the entire world rest on the shoulders of others? Or should you consciously pitch in and take up the challenge of being a *lamed-vavnik* yourself? And, if you do choose to step in, can you afford to do so alone, or should you bring a few others along with you? . . .Once you realize that the whole world depends on you . . .you will not lack in opportunities to serve. Just remember that you are a hidden saint. While it is fine to invite others to join with you, make sure you don't advertise your own

¹ After delivering this sermon, I read a story about Reb Aryeh Levin, known as the Tzadik of Jerusalem, in which he is quoted as saying much the same thing, that we take turns being Lamed Vavniks, which is a “temporary assignment” rather than a “lifetime position.” (From a story by Haim Be’er, shared by Rabbi Jack Reimer).

saintliness. While being a *lamed-vavnik* may be good for your soul, it doesn't belong on a resume."

Finally, today, it may take a village to be a *lamed-vavnik*. I once heard someone say that with the scale of the world's population now, 36 righteous individuals aren't enough. We need 36 righteous *communities*. Then perhaps we would have the critical mass to tip the world's balance.

We have a very special community right here at PCS. Visitors are moved by the warmth and friendliness of our congregation, and the lively spirit of our prayers. But what would it mean to be a *lamed-vav* community? How will our community look when we view one another, not judgmentally, but with an open heart? What deeds of lovingkindness will we do for one another, what amazing *tikkun olam* projects will we undertake for the broader world? Let us make some time this season to dream about our *lamed vav* community in the year ahead.

To live in the model of the *lamed-vavnik* is to open our hearts to the pain of the world, but also to greet the Shekhinah, the Divine Presence in everyone at every moment. It is to admit how small we are and never to know the full impact of our humble deeds, but to do them anyway, because the person we see before us may be one of the 36...or it might be our turn today. May we be blessed this year to begin to find the *tzadik* hidden within, and please God, to renew and develop our congregation into one of the future *lamed-vavnik* communities of the world, a

community in which our hearts are open to one another, where kindness is the norm and compassion is the daily mode of living. Amen.