

The Thirty Six are Hidden

There are not less than 36 tzaddikim/righteous persons in the world who receive the Shekhinah/the Divine Presence
Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 97b, Sukkot 45b

The notion of the thirty-six righteous ones appears in the Talmud, the oral tradition of Judaism, as a teaching of one of the Babylonian rabbis, Abbaye. In Abbaye's teaching, the world required a minimum of thirty-six righteous individuals in order to exist. There follows an argument: what happens if there are not thirty-six in the world? How will the world be redeemed?

The idea may have been suggested by the famous story in the Bible of Sodom, in which Abraham argued with God to save the wicked city (Genesis, chapter 18). God agreed, if ten righteous individuals could be found there. Abraham won the argument but lost the fight; Sodom was destroyed, seemingly because the minimum, ten righteous individuals, could not be found.

That's the shadow side of the story of the thirty-six: it's a minimum. Sometimes the world may not contain thirty-six righteous individuals.

In later Kabbalistic folklore, the thirty-six hidden ones have the potential to save the world, they appear when they are needed, and one of them might be the Messiah. They come at times of great peril, called out of their anonymity and humility by the necessity to save the world. Because they can, because we need them.

We began to get familiar with them, referring to them in Yiddish as the "lamed vov-niks" (lamed vov is Hebrew for thirty-six), and seeing them everywhere in the anonymous acts of good people who rise to great acts in difficult circumstances. And because one of the lamed vov-niks, one of the anonymous thirty-six might be the Messiah, we tended to treat strangers with kindness and the possibility that he or she could be the one.

It could be the person we least suspect, because the thirty-six, like all the sustaining notions of the world in the Kabbalah, are hidden. They may appear, they may not appear. If they do appear, they may be known, they may be unknown. In each generation, we look for them everywhere.

The Hidden and the Revealed

This is how I came to understand the legend of the thirty-six, of the lamed vov-niks, as a story about redemption, through the implied question, the shadow story: what if there were not thirty-six? What then?

And these pictures. What is redemptive about the pictures? The pictures were an exhibit of photographs taken by my friend Todd, who learned the legend from the work of Ben-Zion. Ben-Zion had done a book of poems and drawings on the theme of the Thirty-six. In Todd's pictures, the human forms were implied, not specific. Thirty-six pictures of sticks and bricks and stones and wire that intimate human form, that was the expressed image. It was the subtext that interested me the most. The implied question: what if there were not thirty-six. What then? I realized this as I sat in a hallway of the museum where the thirty-six photographs were hung. It is the shadow and the subtext, all the hidden qualities of this show and its metaphor.

Each one of Todd's picture had a name: Hands, Lovers, Face, and a place, beneath the title, in a caption. What was redemptive was also in the caption:

Berlin, Auschwitz, Dachau, I realized that was the redemptive part, not hands praying, trees that look like faces, what was redemptive was the silent subject and place names underneath each picture:

The Scribe, Torah returning to Auschwitz, Auschwitz, Poland
Mourner, Cracow, Poland
The Thirty-Six, Dachau, Germany
Cantor, Berlin, Germany
The Lovers' Farewell, Block 11, Auschwitz, Poland

That's the redemption in the pictures, and that completes the myth for me. That and the realization as I had researched the individual stories of the *tzaddikim*, of the righteous ones, that they were identified not only by being anonymous, or secret, but because they were all agents of making the hidden revealed. That was their purpose: to make the hidden revealed. Sometimes the activity was secret, hidden, sometimes completely conscious and expressed.

I sat and felt the redemptive possibilities in these pictures, these places, the sadness and the possibility in the legend of the thirty-six, the importance of the myth, the necessary confrontation with its shadow question, the possibilities of redemption if only to stand in our sadness, to be with our suffering, as if we were revealing something that was hidden, as if these lovers in Auschwitz were indeed both stones and bones, an idea and a picture, both.

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