

Not Less Than Thirty-Six, part 2

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

What I was trying to make sense through this entire chapter of the story of the thirty-six was the relation between the legend and the notion of *teshuvah*, a sort of repentance and transformation, the saving of the world, Lillian (Ben-Zion's wife), Todd, myself, and the telling of the tale. Why was I so drawn to this legend? How was it related to the other ideas and images that had taken hold of me? How was it related to redeeming the world?

I asked during my teaching preceding the days of Awe that year if anyone could help me, if anyone could supply the connection for me, what is the connection between righteous individuals and the continuation of the world? How are the righteous necessary? What is it exactly that they do, I asked? What is the connection between an authenticating presence of goodness in the world, as expressed in the legend of the thirty-six, and social and personal transformation, that we call *teshuvah*? It didn't seem theoretical to me. I even wrote the question into the texts and stories that I produced, wondering if anyone knew. It was Rosh Hashanah, the Days of Awe, the time of year given over to thinking about *teshuvah*, transformation, the possibilities of reclamation, redemption.

What brought me to this was the clue in the form of an argument in the Talmud between the two Babylonians, Rav and Shmuel, over what was necessary to save the world. Was *teshuvah*, a transformation, necessary for the redemption of the world, or was it enough to mourn, to stand in our sadness, disappointment, and frustration? To stand there and hurt, is it enough?

The legend of the thirty-six precedes, just precedes, the argument of Rav and Shmuel over what it takes for the survival of the world. The argument seemed so familiar to me; it was just what I was turning over in my mind. I felt as if I went swimming in the sea of the Talmud and bumped into someone I knew. I learned that for Shmuel, suffering is enough for redemption.

About the thirty-six, about *teshuvah*, neither of them will save the world. Not the thirty-six, righteous, heroic individuals, because it's a minimum of thirty-six according to the Talmud, the implication being that there may come a generation, there may have been, in which there are not thirty-six. I started to weep, the thought of a world without thirty-six righteous persons was inexorably sad to me.

I knew, in my blood in my bones, that I had been born into a generation in which there were not thirty-six. I knew this from the stories that my parents hid

from me. I wept over the Talmud the day I read the text in the Talmud, three days prior to the holiday.

That day there was a letter in the newspaper quoting a great light of a previous generation. When asked why the holocaust, the precious man put his head down on his desk and cried.

Teshuvah, a condition of radical transformation, will not save us. I understood, like Shmuel, that the world will not be saved by this, by that, and what to do is to be in our suffering. To stand still and hurt. Those are actually the words from the Talmud: to stand with our mourning. It sounded so contemporary.

I don't know how the world is to be saved, unless it is to repair it with tears. To weep the world well.

I recalled the artist in Italy and the stories that he occasionally told, especially the tender ones. I recalled the softness, weeping in his eyes when he told them.

I was talking with J on *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Shabbat of *teshuvah* transformation between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. He was telling me about a friend of his son who had died in a car accident. "I was in New Jersey with a big client," J said. "I live for this stuff, but I didn't want to be there."

"You don't live for this stuff," I said, "not for this, not for that, but for everything that issues from the mouth of God."

"My heart hurts," J said.

"You're saving the world," I said, "you're saving the world with your tears."

Again, it was the weeping that drew me to these stories. I felt my obsessions were lubricated by tears. When I returned home, I began to wonder why if I told such a story, where were my tears? Then, two months after my return from Italy, while playing music with one of my friends, I began to weep, quietly and inwardly. I had learned how to cry in such a way that no one noticed.

I realized, too, that the weeping was the center of the story in the Talmud, and the connection between the legend of the thirty-six and *teshuvah*. The world would not be saved in the common, obvious ways; it may not be saved even by the righteous, there may be too few of them, nor by the sincere acts of repentance. It would be saved only by our tears.

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