

Almost Over Dina

Abbaye said, "there is not less than thirty-six *tzaddikim* [righteous persons] in each generation who receive the inner presence of Godliness."

-- Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 97b

I had become infatuated with the legend of the thirty-six righteous persons that appears in the Talmud as a teaching of one of the Babylonian rabbis, Abbaye. In Abbaye's teaching, in every generation, the world required a minimum of thirty-six righteous individuals in order to exist. There follows an argument about what happens if there are not thirty-six in the world. How will the world be redeemed?

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

In later kabbalistic folklore, the thirty-six righteous persons have the potential to save the world. They appear when they are most needed, at times of great peril, called out of their anonymity by the necessity to save the world. Because they can, and 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. 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, as if 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, 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.

I was obsessed with the legend and had been writing stories about the thirty-six. I thought the stories had been finished several times before, they had not, but this time I felt I had written all that I had on the subject. Done. I was eager to get onto something else.

It was towards the end of my obsession with the legend of the thirty-six that I received a phone call from a stranger named Dina.

She told me that she had gotten my name from my friend John the flute player. She said that she heard that I was a good listener. I like that, she said. She

asked me to help her. I'm dying, she told me, and I want you to help me with, if anything, unfinished business. She wanted to know if I could do that.

I said I'd do my best.

Dina had become ill and the reality of her passing became clear to everyone around her. From the moment I met her, I did not think of Dina as ill, though she had introduced herself to me by claiming just that, still she didn't look ill act ill she didn't seem ill in any way. She was almost seventy, I suppose, and still burning for life. She came to everything I did, though I could see she managed her time carefully, she showed up at all the concerts, most of the prayers, and other special events around town that I was doing. She especially loved the music.

Later, when she had become hospital ill, she explained to me that she had never softened to music this way, that it was something in the music that opened her in a deeper sense than she had ever experienced before.

The night after she came home from the hospital and set up hospice in her apartment, I came over late with my guitar and sang to her some of the holiest songs I knew. Dina climbed onto her bed trying to find a comfortable position, her daughter fussed in and out of the room, her friend Marcy fixed herself a TV dinner after having come in late from work, it was quiet and tender and oh so close in the room with guitar and voice and just us.

That afternoon I had spent some time with my teacher. I told him about my stories and the preoccupation with the legend of the thirty-six righteous ones. We read a few texts and we spent some time discussing the concept of the *tzaddik* (singular) as it is expressed in the legend of the thirty-six *tzaddikim* (plural) who sustain the world.

"A righteous person is the foundation of the world," my teacher explained, citing Proverbs 10:25, "one righteous person, singular, but there is a plurality of them in the world. Maybe there is even an inner *tzaddik*," he said, "everyone has a sense of the righteous somewhere within, that's the singular sense. Then there is a plural sense, as if God gazed through time and distributed a certain number of the righteous, this one will be needed then, those necessary later, God spread them throughout history, they're queued up into the future so that each generation has its share. Each generation had its righteous person, the *tzaddik* of that generation. God saw that the righteous were few, so God planted them in every generation," my teacher said, quoting the Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 38b.

He mentioned to me something he learned in *yeshivah* [the house of study]. "In the *yeshivah*, the worst thing that you could say about somebody is that the person was *chetzyoni*," he laughed, "I'm not sure people get that today," he said.

"*Chetzyoni*, you mean outside, external?"

"Yeah, but it has a specific sense. *Chetzyoni* -- it was a big insult, as opposed to inward, the inner expression, that's the highest value, the feeling in the heart, the deep inwardness, this is something that cannot be taught. I'm not sure I know myself how to explain it. Maybe it's the inner *tzaddik*, if there is such a thing. An inner deepening. Everyone has a quality of the *tzaddik* in an inner sense. Maybe that's the *tzaddik* you're reaching for, an entirely inner concept."

That night, I went over to Dina's late and brought my guitar. Dina and her friend curled up on her bed like they were teen-agers, both of them in their pajamas, the pajama motif hiding the hospital theme of Dina's wardrobe, the oxygen the only accessory of illness, they positioned themselves with their heads toward the foot of the bed, their feet where the pillow normally lay. Dina was full of the morphine that her daughter had given her before she went off to work. Her daughter was working late at a pub. "I'm loaded!" Dina said, "I'm not asleep, but I'm in and out." She didn't seem in and out at all, we all settled into a deep relaxation of music and intimacy and some time during the playing and the singing Dina grabbed my ankle because of the beauty and sweetness and it was a hug from the ground up.

There was a quiet in the room, a release, I melted into my chair and into my instrument, I dropped so deeply into my body that later I had to lift myself up from the chair to go home. I felt a drop into my deeper self, maybe what my teacher had suggested, the inner *tzaddik* or something else, something that Dina often talked about. Dina was a good talker, and a great listener. I haven't often encountered both qualities in the same person. Dina often talked about the absence of fear. There was no fear in the room, not of death, not of pain, not forgetfulness either, not flight, no distraction, it was the present and it was uncomplicated, pure, the moment exploding in its Godliness.

We had come a long way.

A couple of days later, I received a phone call that I didn't return for a day or two.

“Oh God, I thought you had forgotten about me, or hated me, I’m low self esteem my head is full of junk you have to excuse me, anyway thank you for calling me back.”

It was from a young woman who had come to the synagogue, once. She appeared at the doorway on a Saturday morning, she was often in touch over the e-mail but she didn’t show up.

“I don’t follow through,” she said.

She explained that she had read about Dina’s illness in one of my stories on the e-list. She knew Dina, some years ago she had done her hair, and Dina had been her therapist at one time.

“I read about her being sick in your story so on a Saturday night, I went down there. To the hospital. I stood outside the door and Dina saw me, opened up her arms, and called for me to come and give her a hug. I stayed there from six ‘til nine. I combed her hair out. At nine she said to me, ‘now let’s say goodbye,’ but first she said ‘I’m going to take off my glasses and you’re going to rub my back’ and she rolled over on her side. I rubbed her back from the top of her *tuchos* as they say to her neck, for a whole hour. At one time, she started coughing and I got scared but it was just some sort of healing going on, her words, some movement, I don’t know what it was but she seemed to understand. I called the next day and she said ‘we already said goodbye,’ whatever that means.”

“I used to do her hair, then she was my therapist. She was different from others, she made each session seem as if she was learning too. She was right there. She also has something special, she has the balls in this life to see it through, you know what I mean, to learn the lessons, all of them, the deepest, a lot of people don’t have that.”

“Something else happened that night at the hospital, when I was leaving, she took me close, gave me a big hug, she was in my ear, whispering: ‘I want you to go and find some happiness and peace for me.’ I’m not sure what she meant by that either, but it was profound. I know that. I had a feeling that she was trying to tell me that everything was going to be all right.”

“Do you think so?” I asked.

"What - that everything is going to be all right? Or if that was what she was trying to tell me?"

“Both.”

"Yes, I do. I think so. Both."

I told her that I loved the way she talked, but I don't think she believed me. That night I had the following dream.

We were reconditioning the space for a school and a prayer place. We were working hard. One day, out of nowhere, a dark cloud appeared. I looked out the window and saw it, close and ominous, in the shape of composite pieces that looked like a stew, dark, I knew it was something dangerous. I showed the cloud to the workmen in the room with me and they ran out into hallway hollering for everybody to take cover.

Oh my God, I realized in the hallway that my own daughter was at another school for the day, playing in the city, a guest of a friend of mine in an old school building while we were renovating. I ran to my car and drove frantically to the school in the city.

By the time I arrived, the cloud had passed, my friend was standing outside the old school building, he assured me everything was okay, my child was fine, and we stood outside the gates of the ancient walls of this old building and he thanked me for something, for coming there, for willing to make some sort of long journey to a strange place. I didn't quite understand the thank you but it was comforting.

I left with a sense of gratitude that my child was untouched by the storm, the beauty of the place, the dearness of this friend who was watching my child, this character I did not know, did not recognize, but who was watching over us.

I continued visiting with Dina, spending time with her at home, often at night, bringing my instruments and playing a meditation on the lute, another simple song that she liked, reading poetry, taking requests for her favorite tunes now that she had become familiar with my repertoire and she genuinely seemed to love the music and poetry. Sometimes we talked, sometimes not.

She died on a Monday. She died on her bed, oblique to the pillow-foot axis, she always sprawled all over the bed, her head lifted slightly on a large pillow, an open-mouthed death mask on her face that no longer looked like her. I stayed. There were a few of us there, John played something on his flute, I sat and talked to her quietly in my mind.

I thought about how we met. I remembered the first phone call, "You don't know me, I'm not even Jewish, but I want you to help me. To die. I hear you do that kind of thing."

I did, I said. That was the beginning. Soon we began to fold into each other, much deeper than either of us ever imagined. I sat there after she died in the same chair by her bed where I always sat. Her doctors had predicted death half a dozen times in the last six or seven years. Dina lived large, she lived her death too. She squeezed the entire experience and as I sat there I recalled the last two years or so, how many times that death was predicted and eluded, the intimacy, the friendship, the meditation, the prayers, the poetry, the music, the talk, all that we did together. She had told me her story, it was the last great effort of her life. I felt her absence right away.

Her soul hovered in the room and held onto me as long as I was willing to be held. I sat there for several hours, even after the men from hospice came and took away her body.

We set about arranging the funeral that she had planned out so carefully. Then on Wednesday, two days after Dina died, I had a heart attack. A short one, my daughter likes to say. Seven months later, the doctor reported that I had made a full recovery. Still, I changed everything. Nobody said it, the proximity of Dina's death and my heart attack, the dangerous geography of heart to heart, but everyone in Dina's circle felt the sense of filling up and emptying out, the elation and deflation of Dina's life and death. For me, I felt it in my chest.

james stone goodman