

# The 36 – Who Are They? A Kol Nidre Sermon\*

Rabbi Raymond A. Zwerin

And so, once again, we gather for Kol Nidre. Music sets the mood for this ethereal service; words maintain its pace; prayers reflect the intent of the moment; our presence here together bespeaks its importance. At no other time of the year do our people speak of one theme, with one shared sense of hope, and as if in one voice. That is the power of this evening of evenings, this Shabbat Sabbathot.

As a congregation, this is the 36th time we have celebrated “Kol Nidre” together. I remember the first such evening as clearly as if it had happened yesterday. Perhaps many of you were among the 650 people who attended worship services at First Plymouth that night. The hopes and anticipation were evident; the emotions were palpable. I even remember much of that first Kol Nidre sermon—written as it was on torn half sheets of paper with arrows pointing in all directions leading me from paragraph to paragraph. There were no office computers or even word processors in 1967. We had no copy machine, not even a correcting typewriter—just an old electric letter arm clunker with a fussy comma key. We had no secretary yet, and I could write faster than I could type. And so, a rag-tag though well-crafted piece entitled, “To Dream the Impossible Dream” was created. Indeed, three and a half decades ago, the creation of a new synagogue was just that—a dream,

---

\*Originally given by Rabbi Raymond A. Zwerin at Temple Sinai, Denver for Kol Nidre service, September 15, 2002 / 5763.

a vision—impossible except for a handful of dreamers and hardworking visionaries.

And so, we now begin our 36th year. Thirty-six years! My, how time does move along. It sort of seems to flow out through the back door while we are, so to speak, watching the front. Thirty-six—the number has a special significance. Double *chai*—two times the Hebrew word for “life.” A Rabbi who was good at numbers noticed that, excluding the nightly *shamash*, we light exactly 36 candles during the eight festival days of Chanukah:  $1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8=36$ . Coincidence?!

The number has its own mystery. The Talmud says that at the very beginning of creation, God made a certain type of light that was so penetrating, so powerful, that it was only allowed to last for 36 hours... after which God took it away and hid it for sometime in the future. God replaced it with a weaker, merely physical aspect of that light. Adam was given a brief glimpse of that primordial light and with it was able to see from one end of the world to the other and from the beginning of time to the end of time.

So, according to the *Zohar*, that light was the light of total understanding. The Talmud teaches that anytime the word “light” is used in Torah or in a Rabbinic text it always means knowledge and wisdom and understanding.

And to finish the connection, we are also taught that the miracle of the Chanukah oil burning for eight days occurred 36 centuries after that all-powerful light of the first day of creation. Here is our number 36 again! And playfully, the midrash asks where God hid that primordial light? Where else, but in the lights of everyone’s Chanukiah. So we Jews evoke a glimmer of that supernal enlightenment each time we kindle the 36 candles of Chanukah. What a sweet thought.

And to make certain that we get it, the word light—*ohr*—is the twenty-fifth word of the Torah, another allusion to Chanukah which occurred on the 25th day of Kislev. Oh, and naturally, the word light, *ohr*, occurs 36 times in Torah.

As a mystical concept, the number 36 is even more intriguing. It is said that at all times there are 36 special people in the world, and that were it not for them, all of them, if even one of them was missing, the world would come to an end. The two Hebrew letters for 36 are the *lamed*, which is 30, and the *vav*, which is six. Therefore, these 36 are referred to as the *Lamed-Vav Tzadikim*. This widely-held belief, this most unusual Jewish concept is based on a Talmudic statement to the effect that in every generation 36 righteous “greet the Shechinah,” the Divine Presence (*Sanhedrin* 97b; *Sukkah* 45b).

And who, we might ask, are these righteous ones? Well, the legend maintains that they are each extremely modest and upright, often concealing their identity behind a mask of ignorance and poverty, and usually earning their livelihood by the sweat of their brow.

The *Lamed-Vav Tzaddikim* are also called the *Nistarim* (concealed ones). In our folk tales, they emerge from their self-imposed concealment and, by the mystic powers which they possess, they succeed in averting the threatened disasters of a people persecuted by the enemies that surround them. They return to their anonymity as soon as their task is accomplished, “concealing” themselves once again in a Jewish community wherein they are relatively unknown.

The *lamed-vavniks*, scattered as they are throughout the Diaspora, have no acquaintance with one another. On very rare occasions, one of them is “discovered” by accident, in which case the secret of their identity must not be disclosed. The *lamed-vavniks* do not themselves know that they are one of the 36. In fact, tradition has it that should a person claim to be one of the 36, that is proof positive that he is certainly not one. Since the 36 are each exemplars of *anavah*, humility, having such a virtue would preclude against one’s self-proclamation of being among the special righteous. The 36 are simply too humble to believe that they are one of the 36.

The question that this mystical account always raises in my mind is why are such people needed to keep the world aright? Can not the world

maintain its balance out of the amalgam of seven billion people, the vast majority of whom are good? Certainly, there are exquisite souls among the faithful of all religions who exude goodness and righteousness in their daily deeds.

In most religions such people are called saints or pious ones or and they are viewed as being holy—recognized as unique and set apart. In the Catholic church such people are honored for their service to the community and for the miraculous deeds they performed or for the visions they experienced. In eastern religions, there are extraordinary teachers—swamis, gurus, bhagwans—who by their self-discipline and their instruction have a profound influence on their disciples. Around the world, there are shamans and healers—medicine men and women—pastors, priests, thinkers, scholars, survivors, care-givers, rescuers, counselors, donors of time, builders of community, charitable money people, donors of body parts even ... selfless souls who plunge into swirling rivers, dart into burning buildings, pilot choppers and tugs under the worst of circumstances—do such awesome and fearless things as to leave us all agape.

There are those who for personal or religious reasons keep a constant watch against lust, greed, anger, attachment, and ego—who in their daily life, consistently try to stay above the influence of self aggrandizement and amoral attachments. And there are those who believe in and practice daily living in peace, with love and kindness toward all, and in harmony with nature and neighbors.

In Jewish folk tales, Elijah is depicted as a beggar in the streets waiting for one sweet person to look past his rags and wounds and offer him a kindness—a drop of drink, a morsel of food, a shelter from the elements.

But such is not the condition of the 36—the *lamed-vav tzadikim*. They are not saints; they are not holy people, they are not recognized or known even to themselves. They simply are what they are and in their very being, they somehow sustain the world!

The story is told about a monastery on a mountain high above a small

town in a rural part of Italy. The monks were hard working souls who cultivated grapes and fruits of all sorts—who ate little and slept little and meditated the requisite nine times a day. For years, the fruits of their labors sustained their venture. They sold their grapes and fruits and used the income to plant anew and to maintain themselves and their facility. But over a short period of time, conditions changed. Young monks entered the monastery, the elders took sick or passed away. Indolence, indecision, and changing leadership eroded confidence. Arguments and insults drove wedges between the brothers. Contention replaced cooperation—and soon the monastery was in deep trouble. Some monks left; others stayed off by themselves ... isolated and solitary. Work was done poorly now, if at all, and not in a timely fashion.

What to do? The abbot fearing that the monastery might be shut down and the land sold, called upon an old friend, a rabbi from the nearby township, for advice. The rabbi came to the monastery to visit. After several days of observing and noting and investigating, the rabbi asked the abbot if he could speak to all of the monks together. “My dear friends,” he began, “you are indeed in a perilous situation. There is little income. I see that you are all demoralized. I can only say that you may indeed have to close down this lovely place and go elsewhere. There is one thing that I do know, however. In a vision I was given a very clear and distinct message. I was told that one of you is the messiah!”

A gasp and then a hush fell over the assembled. A cool chill of heightened awareness spread from monk to monk as eyes darted hither and yon in search of who the special one might be. Could it be the abbot? But he had been here for decades and under his watch the place had fallen apart. Yet, he had called upon the rabbi for advice, so ... perhaps?! Could it possibly be the newest monk who came here from a monastery in Perugia, or perhaps it's the wine maker, or the novice, or the silent monk who makes the soup on Tuesdays and Fridays?

Who could tell; who could say? To tell the truth, though, confronted by

a quandary of immense proportions, there was a certain transformative excitement about it all. One of us is the messiah, but which? Yet if it is one of us, then we must change our approach to one another ... for who would ever want to insult or deride or discount the messiah? Immediately, the brothers began to speak in kind terms to one another. Respect, even honor was bestowed. Sharing and helping and taking turns became commonplace. Smiles erased the frowns of yesterday. The gardens and fields were now filled with tillers and sowers, who now worked with diligence as they pondered. Even the oft bland foods seemed somehow tastier. There was humming even singing as the work hours flew by, and the prayers took on a vital rhythm not previously experienced.

Within a season, the crops returned to full vigor, and surprisingly, word of a new spirit in the monastery filtered down to the townspeople. A few of them made their way up the winding road to see for themselves. Their report brought more visitors and soon dozens of people were winding their way up the hill to see for themselves and, while there, to buy a jar of preserves and a bottle or two of wine ... and some of those special candles and flowers ... oh, yes, and that painting ... and this finely woven material. Before long, the monastery was a thriving concern—far different from the depressed atmosphere that prevailed only a short time previous.

The moral of the tale is obvious to us ... if not to the monks themselves. Indeed, no monk at that monastery was the messiah, but when each was treated as such by the others, the community flourished. Likewise, none of us is a *lamed-vavnik* ... or even a *tzadik* ... in the folk sense of that term, but when we treat each other as such, our community and our ventures flourish. Not just in this place of worship and of song and of learning ... but even in the workplace.

Imagine what would happen if every co-worker, and manager, and boss, and CEO were to think that somewhere in the organization or in the office or in the store, some field worker, secretary, nurse, custodian, is a *lamed-vavnik* or a messiah, or a guru, or a saint. No one could discount someone

else, or back-bite, or invent stories, or even gossip about another. And how could one even consider perverting the audit, or treating themselves to a huge interest free loan, or taking millions from a troubled company as a farewell bonus.

And no one could imagine firing thousands of fellow workers as a first step solution to a corporate problem—and no one could imagine dropping a pink slip on a co-worker who just might be one of the 36 ... two days before a holiday.

Just imagine what would happen in our families if we entertained the notion that one of us had inner, spiritual talents yet to be recognized. What would happen if we treated each other all the time with dignity and nobility? That would mean no yelling and no put-downs, and no putting off chores and tasks that others rely upon. It would mean showing concern for parents at all times; it would mean not taking children for granted; it would mean letting each other share in our thoughts and feelings without fear of being discounted or embarrassed or ignored. It would nurture patience and trust and faith. The word “family” might even come to mean something other than ... obligation, stress, and car pooling.

And what might happen if we treated ourselves as if we were one of the 36? We might be, you know. So long as we don't think that we are, we are still in the running. Perhaps we might just take life a bit easier—be less prone to criticize and over-evaluate. If we were one of the 36, why, the world rests on our shoulders. Where we go, it goes; how we act shapes it and influences the spheres. Our every little act of tolerance, *tzedakah*, kindness, patience, friendship ... our every commitment, each positive emotion, even a smile can change the world for the better.

Do I really think so? Nah! But what if? Just suppose ... and maybe, perhaps, *efsher*, possibly! Or as my grandmother used to say when it came to right thoughts and actions, “Culdn't hoirt.”

So what might we do if we aspired to become *lamed-vavnik* like? Let me

share a few suggestions ... after all, it's Yom Kippur, and what is this holy day without a suggestion or two for self-improvement?

- Give people more than they expect and do it cheerfully.
- Don't believe all you hear, spend all you have, or sleep all you want.
- When you say, "I love you", mean it.
- When you say, "I'm sorry," look the person in the eye.
- Believe in love. Not just romantic love, but love for causes, friends, and country. Be informed and be passionate about your ideals and values. You might get hurt, but it's the only way to live life completely.
- Never laugh at anyone else's dreams. People who don't have dreams don't have much.
- In disagreements, fight fairly. Stick to the issues; don't get personal.
- Don't judge people by their relatives. We all have our genetic baggage to carry.
- Talk slowly but think quickly.
- When someone asks you a question you don't want to answer, smile and ask, "Why do you want to know?"
- Remember that great achievements involve great effort.
- Say "bless you" when you hear someone sneeze. It returns their soul to them. It also removes their embarrassment.
- When you lose, don't lose the lesson.
- Remember the three R's: Respect for self; Respect for others; Responsibility for all your actions.

- Don't let a little dispute injure a great friendship.
- When you realize you've made a mistake, take immediate steps to correct it. Never lie to get out of a tricky situation. It only compounds the error. Presidents Nixon and Clinton found this out the hard way.
- Smile when picking up the phone. The caller will hear it in your voice.
- Spend a little time alone.
- Pray as if God cares; care as if God needs you to be the best you.

In the new year, may we all live as if what we do and what we say and how we act can change the world for the better. Perhaps it will *efsher*? Perhaps it will.

Amen

∞

The Matheson Trust

For the Study of Comparative Religion

With thanks to

Temple Sinai Denver