

Tzadikim Nistarim

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The Tzadikim Nistarim (**Hebrew**: צַדִּיקִים נִסְתָּרִים, "hidden righteous ones") or Lamed Vav Tzadikim (**Hebrew**: לִיּוֹ צַדִּיקִים, "36 righteous ones"), often abbreviated to *Lamed Vav(niks)*,^[a] refers to 36 righteous people, a notion rooted within the more [mystical](#) dimensions of [Judaism](#). The singular form is Tzadik Nistar (**Hebrew**: צַדִּיק נִסְתָּר).

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Origins

The source is the [Talmud](#) itself, explained as follows:

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 6. 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 [Shekhinah](#)", the Divine Presence (Tractate Sanhedrin 97b; Tractate Sukkah 45b).^[1]

Their purpose

Mystical [Hasidic Judaism](#) as well as other segments of [Judaism](#) believe that there exist 36 righteous people whose role in life is to justify the purpose of humankind in the eyes of God. Jewish tradition holds that their identities are unknown to each other and that, if one of them comes to a realization of their true purpose, they would never admit it:

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 ones of the 36. In fact, tradition has it that should a person claim to be one of the 36, that is proof positive that they are 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.^[1]

The Tzadikim Nistarim exemplify a mode of leadership that differs from the notion of the visionary public leader that scholars suggest is overvalued in modern culture,^[2] but is well encapsulated in the aphorism that Presidents Truman and Reagan cited, "There is no limit to what a man can do or where he can go if he doesn't mind who gets the credit."^[3]

Lamedvavniks

Lamedvavnik (Yiddish: לאַמעדוואָוויניק), is the Yiddish term for one of the 36 humble righteous ones or *Tzadikim* mentioned in *kabbalah* or Jewish mysticism. According to this teaching, at any given time there are at least 36 holy persons in the world who are *Tzadikim*. These holy people are hidden; i.e., nobody knows who they are. According to some versions of the story, they themselves may not know who they are. For the sake of these 36 hidden saints, God preserves the world even if the rest of humanity has degenerated to the level of total barbarism. This is similar to the story of *Sodom and Gomorrah* in the *Hebrew Bible*, where God told *Abraham* that he would spare the city of Sodom if there was a quorum of at least 10 righteous men. Since nobody knows who the *Lamedvavniks* are, not even themselves, every Jew should act as if he or she might be one of them; i.e., lead a holy and humble life and pray for the sake of fellow human beings. It is also said that one of these 36 could potentially be the *Jewish Messiah* if the world is ready for them to reveal themselves. Otherwise, they live and die as an ordinary person. Whether the person knows they are the potential Messiah is debated.

The term *lamedvavnik* is derived from the Hebrew letters *Lamed* (L) and *Vav* (V), whose numerical value (see *Gematria*) adds up to 36. The "nik" at the end is a *Russian* or Yiddish suffix indicating "a person who..." (As in "Beatnik"; in English, this would be something like calling them "The Thirty-Sixers".) The number 36 is twice 18. In *gematria* (a form of Jewish *numerology*), the number 18 stands for "life", because the Hebrew letters that spell *chai*, meaning "living", add up to 18. Because $36 = 2 \times 18$, it represents "two lives".

In some Hasidic stories, disciples consider their *Rebbes* and other religious figures to be among the *Lamedvavniks*. It is also possible for a *Lamedvavnik* to reveal themselves as such, although that rarely happens—a *Lamedvavnik's* status as an exemplar of humility would preclude it. More often, it is the disciples who speculate.

These beliefs are articulated in the works of *Max Brod*, and some (like *Jorge Luis Borges*) believe the concept to have originated in the *Book of Genesis* 18:26:

And the Lord said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes.^[4]

Notes

- ^a In *Hebrew numerals*, 30 is *lamed* (Hebrew: ל), and 6 is *vav* (Hebrew: ו). The number 36 is written Hebrew: ל"ו.