

A TRIBUTE TO MY FRIENDS IN THE RABBINATE

All too often I am criticized for writing about people who are larger than life. The people I describe are visionaries, strong-willed, energetic individuals who move mountains and bureaucrats and slow-to-shift societal currents into some prophetic program more grand than the status quo would believe possible. The names of Mendilow, Lupoliansky, Freund, and Gaster appear again and again in my articles and poems, colossal souls achieving and surpassing and carving out human triumphs on a grand scale. Still, it often seems that, because I am so impressed by their accomplishments, I am advocating similar lifestyles for all Jews. The Romantic Poet, as it were, wishes to bring people with ostensibly limited capacities into more expansive, breathtaking realms.

It is true that I believe that there are more of these "unbelievable" people in our communities, more than most people believe. And I believe they can be "discovered," much as one young woman, a certain Rachel, "discovered" the great Rabbi Akiva in the clothing of a crudely clad shepherd one day in the Fall sometime in the First Century. Underneath the coarse appearance, she knew that here was a Jewish Leader personified, someone at once noble and humble, and that he would reveal himself to himself and his people, if only he were offered certain opportunities . . . he must be exposed to the Great Teachers. Indeed, though he was forty years old, their combined wills produced the classic metamorphosis: a Jewish peasant assumed his place in the course of Jewish history as the greatest teacher of the Talmud. Thinker, Mensch, embodiment of the best of Jewish values, molder of a new vision of Jewish life.

But he, too, appears larger than life. So it is unfair to analogize from his biography, just as it is unfair to expect a randomly-selected woman from Dallas or a man from New Orleans to suddenly throw away his former lifestyle and turn to other, greater things. A new life — with new-found energy, new spiritual resources, less sleep and less time for shopping, business, and the full array of errands needed for survival. No, that is not a realistic expectation, and I believe (as I often mention) that is why the Talmud tells us there are only thirty-six Righteous Ones in the world. That figure might not be absolutely accurate — there are other opinions in the Talmud — but clearly the number is limited.

On the other hand, if I did not believe that the so-called "average Jew" could not broaden his or her vistas — accommodating to the larger considerations of Life-through-Tzedakah — I would not spend as much time as I do thinking, writing, and teaching about that Mitzvah. Now and again I hear stories of local Tzaddikim, quiet people wholeheartedly giving to others, beyond the expectations of the "norm." But more frequently I am told of individual acts, small patterns of giving which are truly impressive. Generous gestures abound, kindnesses are freely offered, devotion is ingrained in personalities I hear about in scattered sectors of the Jewish world. That is the model I seek — rather than the lives of the Thirty Six.

