ONE OF THE 36

It is said in Jewish tradition 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, or Lamed Vavniks*. 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, while their great deeds are easy to describe, they themselves are very difficult to identify. You may feel you are in their presence, but when you look around, you cannot find them. Legend maintains that they are each extremely modest and upright, often concealing their identity, hiding it even from their own children. In fact were you to approach one, confront them with the noble fact that they are indeed to be counted among the righteous they would fain ignorance, shoo you away with a shy smile and downcast eyes. "No", they would say, "I'm just doing what I can, but thank you for the compliment."

The lamed-vavniks, tradition holds are scattered throughout the world and they 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 be carefully guarded. The lamed-vavniks do not themselves know or believe 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 or she 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.

So each of here tonight have a secret to keep – can I trust you to keep a secret? Mollie Pier is a Lamed Vavnik, and if a rabbi can schep nachus on his or her congregants, then permit us to schep.

Mollie began her Lamed Vavnikness in 1989 after her son Dr. Nathaniel Pier died of complications from AID in late 1989. Mollie had always been an advocate for LGBT community, and to honor her son, his friends and the good work they tried to do Mollie helped to found Project Chicken Soup, and Jewish AIDS Project Los Angeles. Mollie's son was one of the first doctors in New York who treated people with AIDS and she likes to say "He helped people with his knowledge of medicine, and I help people with my knowledge of cooking." So twice a month, early in the morning Mollie leads several dozen volunteers in cooking and delivering kosher meals to people living with HIV in Los Angeles.

Mollie is a leader in the Los Angeles branch of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), and in a similar groups around the city. She moderates discussion groups, gives speeches and, before each performance by the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles, she bakes up to 600 cookies for members to enjoy.

Mollie will tell you that Project Chicken Soup, began with 20 clients and her mondal bread recipe. Mollie is 92 years young and she still spends up to four hours calling clients two Fridays a month to ensure they'll be home for their Sunday food delivery. Six years ago she travelled with our temple to Israel and I have to tell you this 87 year old Jewish grandmother ran circles around much of our group. She has been honored by the Jewish Journal, the Jewish Federation and countless other organizations. On Sunday – PCS will honor her for her founding vision. But tonight, Mollie you honor us, by allowing us to celebrate you, to stand in awe of your good works and to permit your story to nourish our souls – just as your cooking nourishes so many.

Mollie Pier is a Lamed-vavnik, of this I am certain, but lets keep that just between us, she wouldn't believe us anyway.