



VEN NOW, SO MUCH LATER, I AM HARD-PRESSED TO EXPLAIN WHY I, a reclusive, barely computer-literate lapsed Jew, had such a violent reaction to a website, **lamedvav.net**, dedicated to the identification and public exposure of the legendary *lamed vavniks*—the 36 righteous individuals present in every generation upon whose merit the continued existence of our sinful world depends. What perversity, I thought, to expose these “hidden saints,” when, according to the Talmud, they are hidden from the world at large, including from themselves, for a reason—and if revealed, their special role will be lost!

In the beginning, when **lamedvav.net** first appeared, I tried to sound an alarm in the court of public opinion. Since I am neither wealthy nor a celebrity, the means available to me were few. A letter submitted to *The New York Times* was not deemed worthy of publication. Letters to Jewish and intellectual periodicals had a very spotty reception, appearing, if they did, after the cruelest, most mindless surgery.

My opposition made no impact because of the website’s powerful appeal. It fed upon the human appetite for heroes, coupled with the never-ending quest to see who among us was the best, the fastest, the strongest, the prettiest, the smartest. In this light, the designation of the most righteous appeared quite proper, hardly an aberration at all.

Lamedvav.net got off to an extraordinary start, even astonishing and overwhelming its creators, who had not prepared for the actual selection process and now hurried to fill the void.

Here were their basic requirements for nomination: 1.) no individual would be considered unless nominated by an independent third party; 2.) each nominee had to be a real, living person, thereby excluding the deceased and products of imagination; and 3.) in partial recognition of the hidden character of the righteous ones of legend, celebrities of any kind were ineligible.

To submit a name, one prepared a brief biography of the nominee, setting forth the date and place of birth, parentage, education, occupation, and the reasons for qualification. In Wikipedia fashion, any user of the website who decided to participate in the search for the *lamed vavniks* could join in. So if, for example, while idly scrolling through the list of candidates, you came upon the name of someone you knew, you were free to add your own direct experiences with the nominee that tended either to support or reduce his/her moral standing, and so advance or diminish his/her eligibility for sainthood.

Like the making of a mosaic, a detailed, moral portrait of the person emerged, pieced together by many hands.

What were the comments like? A retired sixth-grade teacher was said, by her supporters, to have opened the eyes of many students to their true paths in life. An unemployed young actor thwarted an attempted robbery of a convenience store at great personal risk. In opposition, a longtime neighbor of the teacher claimed that she failed to dispose of her household garbage properly and never returned a morning greeting. And the teller at a local bank described how the actor had walked away with an overpayment of cash

she had handed him inadvertently.

Also in Wikipedia fashion, the website organized itself into a hierarchy: At the top were the administrators, the core group that made policy and served as ultimate arbitrators; below were the editors, users who had established a reputation for dependable, quality work; and at the bottom were the occasional users. To measure the moral attributes of contending saints, the administrators assigned a numerical value to each action with moral consequences; produced a cost-benefit analysis, the cost of the action to the individual candidate measured along with the benefit experienced by those affected by it; and posted each candidate’s changing moral worth number in the large work-in-progress entitled “The Book of Good and Evil.”

Fierce debates ensued about the appropriateness of certain numerical equivalencies. Take the case of an organ donation. What was the appropriate number to assign? How might it compare, say, to modest annual gifts to the homeless? Would the latter be equal in value to the former after five years? Ten? Twenty? Similar questions arose about suitable systems of moral accounting. In time, two major theories developed, one holding that value is a function of the number of lives affected by an individual’s act, the other assigning value on the symbolic meaning of that act alone. Many battles were fought between the utilitarians and symbolists, and hard feelings still exist.

The rating system initiated the website’s celebrity phase. Once each submission was assigned a numerical value, the aggregate net moral worth of every nominee was automatically calculated, and all contenders ranked from the leading saints on down in descending order. It was not unlike a horse race. Soon, the top rankings appeared in daily newspapers, first on the sports page, and then, after an outcry as to appropriateness, in the arts and entertainment section, where it elicited an even greater outcry. Candidate profiles were published in the media. Contenders appeared on TV talk shows. Some even had fan clubs.