In Search of a Real Tzaddik/Tzaddeket:Thoughts for Parashat Tetsaveh

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Tetsaveh

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An ad in a recent issue of our local Jewish newspaper announced that “a Tzaddik” was coming to town, and that he would be speaking at a certain time and place. The ad included a picture of the “Tzaddik”—a man with a long beard and black hat, with his eyes gazing soulfully heavenward.

Several months ago, I received a copy of a synagogue bulletin that also featured a picture of a “Tzaddik” who was to visit the synagogue. This “Tzaddik” had the appropriate beard and black hat, along with long sidelocks, and of course, his eyes were gazing soulfully heavenward.

Indeed, during the past year or so I’ve noticed a number of ads and fliers announcing the forthcoming visits of “Tzadikkim”, all of whom were bearded men, dressed in black, with eyes gazing soulfully heavenward.

Whenever I see such ads, I wonder: what genuine “Tzaddik” would be brazen enough to make his righteousness public? Which real “Tzaddik” would allow himself to be marketed in such a way? Wouldn’t a real “Tzaddik” be a humble person who would be deeply embarrassed to pass himself off as a “Tzaddik”, who would be mortified to be pictured in ads that imply that he has holy powers? And are all “Tzaddikim” men with beards, black hats and “spiritual” eyes?

Obviously, there is a demand among elements of the Jewish public for “Tzaddikim”. People want to believe that there are individuals who have reached a profound level of holiness and who can somehow impart their spiritual powers to benefit those who listen to them. Regrettably, we have read of various “Tzaddikim” who have been found to be charlatans and outright criminals. Instead of praying for their supporters, they have preyed on their supporters.

I fully believe there are Tzaddikim and Tzaddikot in our world; but I also believe that these very righteous and pious people are humble and private. They don't pose as saints, and they don't let others market them as holy people with great spiritual powers. They don't seek to make money by commercializing their righteousness.

In this week's Parasha, we read of the "ner tamid", the eternal light that was to be lit in the Mishkan. Our synagogues have adopted this symbol and have placed a "ner tamid" in front of the holy ark. The "ner tamid" is not an ostentatious torch, but is a humble steady light. It reflects spiritual power by its very gentleness and constancy, not by shouting out its holiness and not by trying to call attention to itself. The "ner tamid" suggests basic qualities of spirituality—humility, quietness, constancy.

Alan Watts, a popular writer on Eastern religion, offered a keen insight: "The most spiritual people are the most human. They are natural and easy in manner; they give themselves no airs: they interest themselves in ordinary everyday matters, and are not forever talking and thinking about religion. For them, there is no difference between spirituality and usual life…" ("The Supreme Identity", p. 128).

Each of us has a thirst for connection with the Almighty. Each of us feels spiritual uplift when we are in the presence of truly good and pious people. But we ought to be very suspicious of those who presumptuously present themselves as being "Tzadikkim", or who seek to raise funds from us as a means of our gaining blessings from the "Tzadikkim". It is not by accident that Jewish folk tradition refers to the 36 "Tzadikkim Nistarim"—hidden saints—upon whom the world depends. The truly righteous are "hidden", and even they themselves are too modest to imagine that they are among this group of Tzadikkim.

We each should want to be in the presence of genuine Tzaddikim. The proper thing is not to look for such Tzaddikim in newspaper ads or fliers, and not in cult-like gatherings. The proper thing is for each of us to strive to be a Tzaddik or Tzaddeket, to live as fully and deeply with a spirit of righteousness, humility, and constancy.

Angel for Shabbat