



YOU NEVER KNOW: A LEGEND OF THE LAMED-VAVNIKS

Written by Francine Prose
Illustrated by Mark Podwal

Lowly Schmuel, a nearly penniless shoemaker in the town of Plotchnik, has a remarkable power. When the town desperately needs rain, his prayers alone bring rain down! Why? It all goes back to the Legend of the Lamed-Vavniks.

JEWISH CONCEPTS

“Look not at the container but rather at what is inside” (*Pirke Avot, Ethics of the Ancestors, 4:27*). Just as we know not to judge a book by its cover, the wisdom of Jewish texts instructs us not to judge any human being by what we see on the outside. Of course, it is human nature to pass judgment, sometimes rashly --but what gems we often discover when we delve more deeply, or give a second glance.

The Bible teaches that every human being is created “*B’Tzelem Elohim*,” in the image of God (*Genesis 1:27*). All people have inherent value and dignity, and despite imperfections, are worthy of respect: whether rich or poor, healthy or sick, young or old, educated or not, all humans come from the same mold. It is incumbent on us to see all humans as equal.

The legend of the *lamed-vavniks* has its origins in the *Talmud*, a central Jewish text of rabbinic law. Lamed-vavnik, a Yiddish term, actually comes from the Hebrew word for 30 -- *lamed* -- and the Hebrew word for 6 -- *vav*. Together they make 36, the number of righteous individuals said to greet the Divine Presence, and without whom the world would not exist. This mystical concept can be tricky to discuss with children -- but above all else, *You Never Know* is a story that inspires us to live righteously and treat all people with kindness and respect.

USING THIS BOOK AT HOME

In this story, the people of Plotchnik think of Schmuel as silly and slow. By the time they realize who he really is, it’s too late to treat him respectfully -- he’s already moved away. But the townspeople have learned their lesson. Anyone can be one of the lamed-vavniks, anyone at all -- even someone like Schmuel.

This deceptively simple moral is one that can take many years to take to heart. Consider the following questions with your child:

- The villagers in Plotchnik didn’t show respect to Schmuel. Why not? Is it easy to treat everyone the same way?
- Eventually the rabbi explained their mistake. What might help remind you to treat people equally?
- What does it feel like if someone doesn’t treat you with respect? How does it feel when someone does?
- If all people treated everybody with equal respect, all the time, what would our world look like?