

UP IN SMOKE

by Rabbi Label Lam

"Do this: Take for yourselves fire-pans - Korach and his entire assembly- and put fire into them and place incense upon them before HASHEM tomorrow. Then the man whom HASHEM will choose - he is the holy one. It is a lot for you Children of Levi!" (Bamidbar 16:6)

Do this: Take for yourselves fire-pans: ...We have One G-d HASHEM, one Ark, one Torah, one Altar and one Kohen Gadol (High Priest) yet you 250 men seek the High Priesthood. ...Here you have the dearest of all services which is incense but there is a deadly drug which is in it by which Nadav and Avihu were burned. This is why he warned them, "Then the man whom HASHEM will choose he will be the holy one"...Moshe told them, "See that that I say to you that the one whom G-d will choose he will emerge from the incense offering alive and all of you will die". (Rashi)

It is a lot for you Children of Levi: A lot has already been given to you that you have been chosen from amongst all the tribes for Divine Service. (Midrash)

Who is a fool? One who destroys all that is given to him. (Tractate Chagigah 4A)

Moshe challenges Korach and his crew to a show down with the deadly incense offering and in the same breath (verse) tells him that he's got a lot. What message is Moshe telling to Korach?

There was student of Yisrael Salanter who had assumed an important rabbinical position in Russia. The Czar Nicholas had a deep seeded hatred for this young and clever Rabbi. He wanted to kill him if he could, but he needed an excuse. Therefore he devised a plan. He invited community leaders from all over to his palace for a conference, including the one he aimed to trap. He called for the meeting to take place on Shabbos assuming that he would not show and that would be cause enough for him to do what he wanted to do. To Czar's surprise the Rabbi managed to attend without compromising on the Laws of Shabbos. Nicholas, though, was not finished. At one point he opened up a fancy cigar box and one by one, personally, handed a cigar of distinction to each of his invited guests. When he came to the Rabbi he expected to be snubbed but the Rabbi accepted the cigar reasoning that muktzah is rabbinical in origin and if he did it in a slightly different manner that would be "legally" acceptable.

Superseding all etiquette and protocol once again the Czar Nicholas proceeded to light the cigar of each guest individually. When he came to the Rabbi he knew that this would be the moment of truth. The Rabbi predictably and promptly withdrew his cigar refusing the magnanimous gesture of the "all-powerful" Czar, adopting, as it were, a posture of rebelliousness.

The Czar was about ready to retaliate when the Rabbi preempted with the following explanation before the assembled guests, "Mighty Czar! I cannot let this cigar be burned away frivolously. It is far more valuable to me than that. I cherish it and prefer to put on display for my community and my people the precious gift I have received from such a great king as your- self." Czar Nicholas' plot was quieted and the Rabbi escaped with his life.

How true are those words he spoke?! If one would receive a gift from a king, it would be the height of foolishness to throw it away for no good reason. How much more so when one considers a gift that is given by the "King of Kings"... The Holy One Blessed Be He. Korach, as a Levi, had been selected for special service and so Moshe warned him. By lighting up that incense he was risking that every-thing good and great HASHEM had granted him in life would go up in smoke. Text Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and **Torah.org**.