

NOTHING WASTED

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

Nothing is as painful as the loss of a child. The wound it leaves in the heart of the parent is so deep, so jagged that no amount of time can ever heal it. And if that child was a shining young star, beautiful, talented and accomplished, the pain is that much greater to bear. The pain Aaron felt at the sudden demise of Nadab and Abihu, his two brilliant sons who perished while bringing unauthorized fire into the sanctuary, must have been excruciating.

With this in mind, let us take a close look at this week's Torah portion. The reading begins with a description of the sacrificial service conducted by Aaron, the High Priest, on Yom Kippur. The Torah prefaces these instructions with the following words, "And the Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near to Hashem and died . . . With this shall Aaron come into the sanctuary, with a young bullock as a sin-offering . . ."

Two questions immediately come to mind. One, why mention the death of Aaron's two sons in this context? What was the point of rubbing salt in his wounds? Furthermore, what is the significance of the seemingly superfluous words "with this"?

Let us reflect for a moment on loss. Two people die. One is killed on a subway by a deranged killer on a shooting spree. The other dies of smoke inhalation while rescuing children trapped in a burning building. Both families mourn the death of their loved one, but which feels a greater sense of loss, of emptiness? Clearly, the family of the hero suffer a more bearable sorrow. At least there was meaning to his death. But what is the family of the subway victim supposed to feel? How are they deal with the pointless snuffing out of a vibrant life? How are they to deal with the sudden senseless void that has appeared in their lives? The perception of waste is the most difficult aspect of personal loss.

The untimely deaths of Nadab and Abihu, two brilliant young priests with such promising futures, must have seemed like such a terrible waste. But our Sages tells us that their intentions were pure, that they acted out of tremendous although somewhat misguided zeal. The commentators explain that anything a person does for the good takes on a life and an existence of its own, even if its effectiveness is not immediately apparent. The act, the word, the thought still exist, and at some time and place in the future they can effect important results. Nothing is lost. Nothing is wasted.

This is what Hashem was telling Aaron by way of consolation for the death of his two sons. "With this" shall Aaron enter the sanctuary. With the fiery zeal of his two sons, which would now be

channeled to their proper destination through the Yom Kippur service performed by their father. Through his actions, Aaron could tune in to the spiritual energy generated by his sons and harness it to add momentum to his own service. In this way, he could bring fulfillment to the lives of his sons and solace to his own broken heart.

A young dissident was sentenced to fifteen years of hard labor in a prison camp. Each day he would push a long pole attached to a gear that turned a heavy millstone in the next room. Day in and day out for fifteen years, from dawn until long after dark, the prisoner pushed the pole in an endless circles of backbreaking labor.

When he was finally released, he asked to see the millstone, and his wish was granted. The room turned out to be dark and musty, covered with cobwebs and many inches of dust. The former prisoner took one look and burst into tears.

"Why are you crying?" asked the puzzled warden.

"All these years, I had thought I was grinding grain, that I was helping make bread. But now I see that all that terrible hardship was a total waste. That is simply too much to bear."

In our own lives, we often expend energy on all sorts of good deeds without seeing any tangible results. For instance, we put tremendous efforts into our children, and sometimes we become frustrated, thinking it is all for naught. But it is not. We can all take comfort in the knowledge that no good deed or good word is ever wasted, that somewhere, sometime, in one way or another, our efforts all bear fruit... Text Copyright © 2008 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and **Torah.org**.

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