

# "WHERE'S THE BEEF?"

*by Rabbi Yaakov Menken*

*"And Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon, each took his censer, and put fire in them, and put incense on each, and brought before G-d a strange fire, which He had not commanded them. And a fire went out from before G-d and consumed them, and they died before G-d." [Lev. 10:1-2]*

When we read this Torah portion, it is natural to be perplexed. What did these sons of Aharon do that was so wrong? Why did they deserve to die?

Concerning their actions there is considerable debate. Some commentaries say that they took fire from the altar, while others say that they made their own. Did they proceed to the inner altar, or only the outer? Did this tragedy begin before fire descended upon the altar (9:24), or after?

Concerning the source of their error, however, there seem to be only two primary opinions. One is that they went in having drunk wine, if not intoxicated. The evidence for this view is that the remaining Cohanim, Aharon and his other sons, were warned immediately thereafter not to enter the Tabernacle after drinking intoxicating beverages (10:9).

The second opinion, however, speaks of a more subtle flaw in the brothers' behavior. The Medrash tells us that they did not ask Moshe or Aharon what to do or whether to offer this incense. They decided to do this on their own -- and for this alone, says Rebbe Eliezer, their punishment was appropriate.

The Medrash elaborates: Nadav and Avihu would walk behind Moshe and Aharon, wondering when the two leaders would die and it would become their turn to lead the Jewish people. They were anxious to take the reins, and they "jumped the gun," as it were, trying something new without consulting the proper authorities.

One thing is clear: no one argues that Nadav and Avihu had ill intent. They did not enter in order to rebel against the authority of Moshe and Aharon, or to change the way incense was brought. All of the Medrashim and commentaries say that they were very high-minded, spiritual men, and the death penalty was warranted only in accordance with their immense spiritual stature.

What, then, do we learn from their story? At a very straightforward level, we see that it is possible to be well-motivated, but to go in the wrong direction. Often the road to success lies straight ahead, following a more conventional path.

When it comes to business, we understand that some ventures are doomed from the start. No one is

going to make a living by opening a restaurant featuring dishes of possum and lizard. The collective public's appetite is simply not that adventurous. A restaurant can offer exotic dishes, but the owner cannot delude himself into imagining that they will be the core of his business.

With regards to Judaism, a similar level of analysis is warranted.

Just a few years ago, a well-known foundation gave \$75,000 to a Jewish dance troupe under the guise of "Jewish continuity programming." Now I am hardly opposed to Jewish cultural programs. But I have yet to see the study which demonstrates that large numbers of people can develop a lifelong attachment to the Jewish people by dancing horas.

More recently, Moment magazine ran an editorial from a prominent designer of Jewish Internet sites. After years of study and site construction, he concluded that "most Jewish organizational endeavors in the high-tech field continue to be wired for failure."

What, then, is successful? "It's usually about learning. The best uses of technology... will be combinations of distance online learning and training, creating massive and easily accessible databases of Jewish content..."

Welcome home. Jewish continuity is about Jewish learning. Only Jewish education has a track record of success. Investments in other areas are valid and valuable only on the periphery -- as first-step outreach and engagement efforts. They need to feed into Jewish learning, or little will come of it.

People may come to taste venison, but they'll only become regular customers if you have the beef!

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Yaakov Menken