

# Individual rights versus communal responsibility

## VIEWPOINT

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THE tale told in Leviticus of Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron who are struck down by God after rushing into the Holy of Holies and offering *esh zara*, an unauthorised fire-offering not commanded them (Lev. 10:1), is a tragic tale of two noble, righteous individuals fired by zealous enthusiasm, but unhinged by one fatal character flaw.

The Midrashic explanations as to what their sin really was all point to a single conclusion. They placed their individual desires (albeit that they were spiritually-directed) ahead of the needs of *Klal Yisrael*. At a time when they should have been harmonising their *avoda*, their Divine service with that of their fellow-Cohanim for the good of the nation, they craved individual freedom more than they valued their duty to the community.

When we recite *Pirkei Avot* (*The Ethics of the Fathers*) on Shabbat between Pesach and Rosh Hashana, we introduce each chapter by declaring: "All Israel has a share in the World to Come — as it is said 'Your people are all righteous' (Isaiah 60:21). Isaiah the prophet, the great chastiser of Israel, moral conscience of the nation, declares *v'ameich kulam tzadikkim!* There is no contradiction! When the needs of the *klal*, of the community, take precedence, then we are a "people" and "righteous". But when the rights and freedoms of individuals, or pockets of individuals, were allowed to override communal responsibility, then the ominous predictions of the great chastiser were sadly realised.

Those individuals in our community — Jewish newspaper editors and others — who are acting, as they see it, to protect group interests and individual freedom of expression, are acting with undoubtedly the highest motivation. Assuredly they see themselves as *tzadikkim*, as righteous individuals, and maybe in a sense they are. We acknowledge their courage and *z'rizut*, their zeal. Nadav and Avihu were also fired with zeal, through and through — but it was, the Torah tells us, an *esh zara*, a fire having its root in alien and idolatrous values *asher lo tsiva otam* with no possibility of connection (*tsiva* has the root-meaning of connection) with the Divine.

There are times when we be fired with idealism and we are convinced we have right and justice and fairness on our side, but in our zeal for the individual cause, we fail to see the bigger picture, ignoring the real question: Do we have Judaism on our side?

If there has been a single slogan which has been adopted in the Jewish world as a number-one imperative for our generation, it has been Jewish continuity. But our history should have taught us by now that Jewish continuity without Torah is and has been proven impossible. The proverbial fourth-generation Reform Jewish fam-

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ily does not exist. No antidote to assimilation has ever proven efficacious other than adherence "to the real thing" — not Coca-Cola, but Total-Torah!

Total-Torah doesn't mean just taking what you want and jettisoning what you don't like. Total-Torah doesn't mean rejecting the laws that don't sit well with 21st-century-politically-correct ide-



ology. Total-Torah is a package deal, and if *Klal Yisrael* fail to take the package, it will find itself on the first plane to the oblivion of assimilation.

We have in Sydney a Jewish community 90 per-cent of whom are Orthodox Jews, connected to Orthodox synagogues, accepting the jurisdiction of Orthodox rabbis in all matters to do with Judaism (whether ritual or ethical) and identify-

ing with the norms of Orthodox Jewish belief, even though in their personal practice they may not all keep all the *mitzvot* all the time. The voice of that 90 percent has not been sufficiently heard in recent controversial debates within the pages of the *Australian Jewish News*. Instead, we have witnessed a plethora of strongly-held views from

a vocal activist minority, all peddling the same theme — rights of the individual, freedom of the media, zealous proselytising of the so-called new morality. There has been scant mention of Jewish continuity, Jewish *k'dusha* (holiness), Jewish mission.

My private dialogues in recent weeks with individuals and groups ranging from the over-60s to the under-20s have uncovered the voices of the Jewish-tradition-identifying 90 percent. Understandably, in an age when to articulate non-politically-correct views constitutes an act of courage, most of this 90 percent prefer to be silent in the public arena.

Yet courage has always been a Jewish requirement. And as for this silent Jewish majority of affiliates who do care about individuals and their needs, who do care and should care for the happiness and well-being of every single Jew, but who care even more for the survival of Judaism and the Jewish people, maybe they ought to summon that courage and find their voice. I find it the height of irony that the only person reported in the *AJN* as acknowledging that we are "the people of the Covenant (at Sinai)" is Pope John Paul II, who used the phrase in a note he inserted among the stones of the Western Wall. After 2000 years of delegitimation, the Catholic Church acknowledges us for whom we are. Are we, perversely, trying to forget what we are?

It is not easy to stick out one's neck and say one thing while the world outside is saying another. Yet that has always been the mission of *Klal Yisrael* ever since the dawn of our history. *Ivri* (Hebrew) means "to be on the other side." In every generation, there are idols to be smashed; in every age there are eternal principles to be reaffirmed. And we, the *ne'emanim*, the faithful survivors who seek Jewish continuity, dare not be found wanting.

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