Tampering with Tradition

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(A Devar Torah relating to Parashat Shemini - Leviticus 9:1 - 11:47)

There are times when the Torah tells us a story that serves as a metaphor for issues that we face today. This week's Torah Portion - Parashat Shemini - relates the strange story of Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu. As sons of the first Kohen Gadol (High Priest), Nadav and Avihu were also Kohanim who received instructions from their father on how to conduct the sacrificial services inside the newly inaugurated Mishkan. When they entered the sacred space designated for the Kohanim to offer sacrifices, the Torah relates a peculiar incident:

Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan, placed fire on it, and then incense on it. They offered it before God, but it was unauthorized fire which God had not instructed them to offer. Fire came forth from before God and it consumed them, so that they died before God.

The Hebrew word for "unauthorized fire" is "esh zara," which, in addition to "unauthorized," is also translated as "foreign." Both of these translations point to the fact that Nadav and Avihu entered the House of God and introduced foreign elements that were strange to Judaism and Jewish tradition. By introducing these foreign practices, they tampered with the traditional flow of the services, and doing so was considered such a grievous offense that they were consumed by fire.

I read Jewish newspapers as much for the advertisements as for the articles. A quick scan of the advertisements by synagogues and Jewish organizations tells

you what's really going on in the Jewish community. Synagogues that are desperate to "draw in the big crowd" will resort to anything these days. In recent months, I have seen advertisements for "Buddhist Shabbat Meditation Services" and "Gospel Shabbat Concerts," and a colleague recently told me how shocked he was that a synagogue held a "St. Patrick's Day Purim" event.

What can we say about this growing - and in my opinion disturbing -- phenomenon in the Jewish world? Perhaps we have, in fact, failed to make a compelling case for "old school" Jewish tradition, but are these wild, quick fix alternatives really the answer to our problems? Is the introduction of Buddhism, Gospel choirs, St. Patrick's Day revelries, or any other "esh zara" into our services the only way to infuse new meaning into tradition? Do those who lead or attend such spins on Jewish spirituality actually feel that they are participating in something with Jewish meaning?

Our transmission of a meaningful, compassionate and relevant expression of Jewish tradition certainly leaves a lot to be desired. But there are limits to where we can and should search for answers to our pressing questions. Judaism is a rich, vibrant and fascinating tradition. It is intellectual, spiritual, cultural, communal and personal all at once. We have a vast treasure of Jewish literature, along with 3000-plus years of history. Shall we give all of that away in the name of filling seats one Friday night at a gospel performance in synagogue? True creativity lies in the ability to infuse ancient traditions with modern meaning. Conducting a Shabbat service with a Buddhist twist is hardly creative. It's a cheap imitation.

Nadav and Avihu brought an "unauthorized offering" whose spirit was alien to Jewish tradition. The foreign flames that they introduced in the services came back to burn them. Indeed, a powerful metaphor for many rabbis and congregants today.