

Surviving 'Survivor' and the Temptation of 'Temptation Island'

By Daniel Brenner

As much as I enjoy voyeurism, deceit, and skin -- like any other red-blooded American male -- I think that it is time to speak out about the overall effect that "Survivor" and its romantic step-child, "Temptation Island," is having on America's TV viewers.

Many critics have been concerned with the sex or the back stabbing on these shows, but I figure that you'll find those in any episode of "Days of Our Lives." So I'm more concerned with the overall message of "reality" TV.

I'm not the first to say that catharsis is what drives people to reality TV. The more we are victims of invasions of privacy by credit bureaus, health insurance conglomerates, law authorities and perhaps DNA banks, the more we need to be told that it is all right that strangers know intimate details of our lives. The recent Supreme Court debate on thermal imaging surveillance has raised this anxiety to new levels. As a result of these invasions into privacy, we have perpetuated the cult of celebrity, producing the ultimate vehicle of celebrity for the common man -- reality television -- which takes Joe Shmo and makes him a star because he is Joe Shmo (or a handsome version of such). I ask-couldn't they have drawn the line at the "Newlywed Game"? Given out a few parting gifts and called it a day?

I joke, but celebrities are teaching us that we can only get attention and love when we divulge our private lives. Reality television attempts to capture the national fascination with this half-truth.

There is a teaching that says that the words of prayer, "How beautiful are your tents, Yakov," were said because when the Israelites camped, they made sure that no tent flap opened to give a view of another tent opening. I find this teaching even more meaningful in this wired world, where the little green men in the TV are watching us.

So what is the antidote for this world of data banks, tell-all and glorified invasion of personal space? I'm betting on a backlash - a return to some old world modesty. People will chuck their credit cards and begin to use cash so they cannot be traced. People will begin to opt out of the whole on-line craze and return to books. Global chat-rooms will give way to close communal ties. PCs will be turned into planters.

All this may sound rather utopian - but another possibility is that the future holds a turf war in which the invaders of privacy battle the protectors of privacy. As the environmental organization Earth First is to developers, hackers will be to media conglomerates, marketers and government agencies. Companies and agencies

that amass information will find that their files are sabotaged, and the hackers who do so will be presented as public enemy number one. They, of course, will be the ones who are accused of violating the laws of private intellectual property (c'est ironic, non?). Already European Union officials are prosecuting hackers as terrorists.

Reality TV isn't driving the mad race to amass information on consumers and individual citizens, but it is an analgesic that soothes the pain while we are picked at.

For that reason, I urge you to change the channel, or better yet, find a nice quiet place to read a book.