

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

STUDY OR PRACTICE?

The rabbinic version of the "chicken or the egg" conundrum is "which is more important: studying or doing mitsvot?". Our passage, in which Rabbi Akiba gives his answer to that question, comes as a commentary to this mishnah:

Mishnah

He who performs one precept is well rewarded, his days are prolonged and he inherits the land. But he who does not perform one precept, good is not done to him, his days are not prolonged and he does not inherit the land. (M. Kiddushin 39b)

This mishnah may seem harsh and yet it points to an uncompromising truth. Our lives are made up of small choices which, when taken together, shape our lives. Every deed of ours counts. Every small step we take toward holiness matters. And every small step we take away from holiness matters, too. Rabbinic legend has it that the world is completely balanced and the next act you take, for good or for evil, changes the fate of the entire world. We may not feel comfortable with this much responsibility yet, in the spiritual frame of reference, our deeds of kindness and meanness are that meaningful.

Gemara

Rabbi Tarfon and the Elders were once reclining in the upper story of Nitza's house in Lydda when this question was raised before them: Is study greater or practice? Rabbi Tarfon answered, saying: Practice is greater. Rabbi Akiba answered saying: Study is greater for it leads to practice. Then they all answered and said: Study is greater for it leads to action. (B. Kiddushin 40b)

Rabbi Tarfon frequently argued matters with Rabbi Akiba. Rabbi Tarfon tended to follow the rules of Beit Shammai; a more conservative which favored the rich. Rabbi Akiba, as we know, came from the humblest of beginnings. Perhaps that explains the difference in their views. Rabbi Tarfon might have assumed that learning was a part of life and so emphasized action. Rabbi Akiba, coming from a poorer background, where he was not even aware of the mitsvot that could be done, favored learning because only once one had learned what the mitsvot were could one set about doing them. His rule is generally agreed upon to be the accepted view.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the worth of one good deed or one bad deed? Have you ever felt the consequence of one deed in an immediate fashion?
2. Which is greater, study or practice? Can you imagine cycles wherein practice becomes more important than study and then vice versa? Where is the balance to be found?