

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted August 31, 2000 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

IT'S ALL IN YOUR INTENTION

In our continuing study of the concept "sit and be silent" we find that action or inaction is not the measure of a deed. It is the person's inner state which defines whether an act is praiseworthy or blameworthy.

There are four types among those who attend the House of Study:

One sits near [the instructor] and receives a reward.

Another sits near and receives no reward.

One sits at a distance and receives a reward.

Another sits at a distance and receives no reward.

One asks questions and receives a reward.

Another asks questions and receives no reward.

One sits in silence and receives a reward.

Another sits in silence and receives no reward.

He who sits near [the instructor] that he may hear and learn receives a reward, but he who sits near so that people may say, "That man draws near and sits before the wise", receives no reward.

He who sits at a distance to pay respect to a great scholar receives a reward, but he who sits at a distance so that people may say, "That man has no need of this master", receives no reward.

He who asks questions so that he may understand and learn receives a reward, but he who asks questions so that people may say, "That man asks questions before the Sages" receives no reward.

He who sits in silence that he may listen and learn receives a reward but he who sits in silence so that people may say, "That man sits in silence before the Sages", receives no reward. (Avot d'Rabbi Natan 40:7)

The exact same actions (viewed from the outside) can either bring one reward or none. Intention-one's inner state-is supremely important in Judaism. An act can be either a sin or a great mitzvah depending on one's intention. And only God and the person truly know what that intention is.

Discussion Questions:

1. How have you seen intention change the nature of an act?
2. How does one communicate intention? Is there any truly trustworthy way to do so?
Why does intention matter so much? Can you think of other examples we have studied that shed light on this issue?