

Study vs. Action (Tzav)

Criticism is a study by which men grow important and formidable at very small expense. He whom nature has made weak, and idleness keeps ignorant, may yet support his vanity by the name of a critic. - Samuel Johnson

I have met very knowledgeable and studious people over the years. There is one version of such educated people that for some reason always troubled me – the professional student. It's that rare bird of academia who is constantly studying, constantly delving into wisdom or knowledge, but never taking it outside the study hall or classroom.

There is a deep line of thought throughout Jewish doctrine as to the value of study, particularly Torah study. Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Prague, the Kli Yakar (1550-1619), on Leviticus 6:2, is no exception and he learns this from the extraneous phrase, “these are the laws of the burnt offering” and quotes the Talmudic explanation, that “whoever has learned the laws of the burnt offering, is as if he has sacrificed the burnt offering.” (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Menachot 110a). In some metaphysical fashion, study, just learning the theoretical aspects of some discipline, is converted, and considered the equivalent action, of having truly performed with one's hands and body the subject being learned.

He adds, however, a notable caveat. Study is indeed a replacement for doing, but only when there exists an inability to do it. When a person has the ability to perform a commandment, to do the right thing, to accomplish what is within his power, but he sticks to his books, then according to the Kli Yakar, the person didn't do anything and his study itself, though perhaps commendable, lacks the power of action.

May we be continuous students and perhaps more importantly, may we know how to turn that study into action.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the warm hospitality of Congregation Shaare Tefilla of Dallas, TX.