

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted August 15, 2000 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

Q & A

We begin our study of the principle *yosheiv v'shoteik*, "sit and be silent" with two contrasting teachings from *Pirkei Avot*:

[Hillel] used to say: If I am not for myself, who is for me?
If I care only for myself, what am I?
If not now, when? (M. Avot 1:14)

Shammai said: Make your study of the Torah a fixed habit.
Say little and do much.
And receive everyone with a cheerful countenance. (M. Avot 1:15)

Hillel and Shammai represented differing points of view on Jewish life. Hillel favored Babylonian dialectic debate, liberal interpretation of Torah and empathized more with the poor than the rich. Shammai attracted more of the aristocrats and conservative interpreters of Torah. Here we have their two core teachings linked together in *Pirkei Avot* itself. It is almost as if Shammai answers each of Hillel's questions. How can you be for yourself? By studying Torah. How can you care for others? By doing what you promise without great fanfare. When should you seize the moment? Every time you encounter another of God's creatures.

The commentary to *Pirkei Avot*, called *Avot d'Rabbi Natan*, developed in the early third century though much of the material in it was added later. Commenting on Shammai's instruction it says:

"Say little and do much." What does this mean? It teaches that the righteous say little and do much, whereas the wicked say much and do not even a little. (*Avot d'Rabbi Natan* 13:3)

This is a clearcut interpretation of the idea. It is righteous to act rather than pretend to act.

Discussion Questions:

1. Which advice do you find more useful, Hillel's or Shammai's? Why?
2. Can you give an example of how the righteous say little and do much and the wicked say much and do little that exemplifies the point?