

Mishlei 03-04

Wisdom, the Key to Life (3:13-18)

Key Concepts

Wisdom is a glorious gift from Hashem, but it is a gift that is given only to those who are capable of receiving it. A person must prepare himself to receive Hashem's wisdom by learning Torah from a teacher or *sefarim* (holy books). If he does so, Hashem will provide the "*siyata dishmaya*" (Divine help) that enables him to "discover" wisdom like a person who finds a lost object.

Mishlei compares this situation to the challenge of finding silver or gold buried deep in the ground or finding pearls lying at the bottom of the ocean. A great deal of effort is required to take possession of these treasures but because of their great value, people continue to risk their lives in seeking to recover them.

When people hunt for treasure they think of it as a means of accumulating wealth and honor, and thereby making a life for themselves. But often the search for wealth has the opposite effect, bringing the person to his grave.

Seen from this point of view, the effort to "find" wisdom becomes especially worthwhile. In comparison to gold and silver, which offer the illusion of great value, wisdom offers real and unlimited value, including a long life of peace and contentment in this world, followed by eternal life in the next. There is nothing that material pursuits can offer to compare with this great reward.

Exploring Mishlei

After contrasting wisdom, the key to life, with ordinary earthly treasure, Mishlei presents us with a positive metaphor. He identifies wisdom with the Tree of Life. In Gan Eden man did not fully appreciate the Tree of Life. He already had life – it was knowledge that he lacked. Then, when he sinned, he was evicted from Gan Eden and denied the Tree of Life which he no longer deserved. Mishlei reminds us that through the kindness of Hashem, man has been given another chance. He has, in effect, been given access to the fruit of the Tree of Life in the form of the wisdom of the Torah.

(יג) אֲשֶׁרִי אָדָם מָצָא חֲכָמָה וְאָדָם יִפְיֵק תְּבוּנָה: (יד) כִּי טוֹב סְחָרָה מִסְחָר כֶּסֶף וּמְחָרוֹץ תְּבוּאָתָה: (טו) יִקְרָה הִיא מִפְּנִינִים וְכָל חֶפְצֶיךָ לֹא יִשׁוּוּ בָּהּ: (טז) אַרְדָּ יָמִים בְּיְמִינָהּ בְּשִׂמְאוּלָהּ עֵשֶׂר וְכְבוֹד: (יז) דְּרָכֶיהָ דְרָכֵי נֵעַם וְכָל נְתִיבֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם: (יח) עֵץ חַיִּים הִיא לַמְחַזְקִים בָּהּ וְתִמְכֶיהָ מֵאֲשֶׁר:

(13) *Fortunate is the man who has found wisdom and the man who is able to derive understanding. (14) For its dealings are better than dealings in silver. Its yield is [better] than fine gold. (15) It is more precious than pearls and the value of anything you desire cannot compare to it. (16) A long [lifespan] of days are at its right hand. At its left hand [there is] wealth and honor. (17) Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its pathways are harmonious peace. (18) It is a tree of life to those who firmly take hold of it. And those who sustain it are assured of fulfillment.*

Learning Mishlei

(יג) אֲשֶׁרִי אָדָם מָצָא חֲכָמָה

Fortunate is the man who has found wisdom — אֲשֶׁרִי אָדָם מָצָא חֲכָמָה. He was given the opportunity to learn from teachers and *sefarim* (holy books) and he was motivated by *mussar* to study the material conscientiously so that he became fluent in it.

וְאָדָם יִפְיֵק תְּבוּנָה:

And fortunate is the man who is able to derive understanding — וְאָדָם יִפְיֵק תְּבוּנָה by thinking through the wisdom that he has acquired and developing new insights from it. As a result he has become qualified to teach wisdom to others. Through the process of teaching he reinforces the wisdom in his own mind.

(יד) כִּי טוֹב סְחָרָה מִסְחָר כֶּסֶף

He is happy with the wisdom he has gained, **for its dealings are far more profitable than dealings in silver** — כִּי טוֹב סְחָרָה מִסְחָר כֶּסֶף. The value of wisdom is so awesomely great that that acquiring it and accumulating it is a better investment of his time than acquiring silver.

וּמְחָרוֹץ תְּבוּאָתָה:

Its yield is even better than that of fine gold — וּמְחָרוֹץ תְּבוּאָתָה. Furthermore, as opposed to trading in precious metals, after completing a profitable transaction,

the wisdom is still in his possession and he also has the gratitude of the person whom he has taught.

(טו) יְקָרָה הִיא מִפְּנִינִים

It is more precious — יְקָרָה הִיא — than pearls — מִפְּנִינִים, whose special value is based on their not being found in our environment but in the distant sea. Similarly, wisdom does not originate in our world, but in the sublime world of the spirit. Therefore, it is worth giving up all one's human, physical desires in order to attain it.

וְכֹל חֲפָצֶיךָ לֹא יִשׁוּוּ בָהּ:

And the value of anything you desire — וְכֹל חֲפָצֶיךָ cannot compare to it — לֹא יִשׁוּוּ בָהּ for how can you compare something transitory with something eternal.

(טז) אַרְךְּ יָמִים בְּיַמִּינָהּ

If you conscientiously learn Torah wisdom without a selfish motive you will be rewarded with a long life so that you can continue to learn and do mitzvos. You will find that wisdom is accompanied with a **long** lifespan of productive **days** — אַרְךְּ יָמִים at its right hand — בְּיַמִּינָהּ, that is, as a primary benefit. Not only will you have a long life in this world, but you will be rewarded with eternal life in the next.

בְּשֵׂמֹאלָהּ עֵשֶׂר וְכָבוֹד:

You will even find a secondary benefit, for **at its left hand** — בְּשֵׂמֹאלָהּ, wisdom is accompanied with **wealth and honor** — עֵשֶׂר וְכָבוֹד. If your motive is not pure, you may not be worthy of the primary benefit but you will still be eligible for the secondary benefit. Of course, wealth and honor can have the effect of shortening your life and so you are strongly advised not to rely on it.

(יז) דְּרָכֶיהָ דְּרָכֵי נֵעִם

Its ways are ways of pleasantness — דְּרָכֶיהָ דְּרָכֵי נֵעִם. The wisdom of the Torah and its mitzvos bring joy to those who observe them for their nature is inherently sweet. The characteristic behavior of a talmid chacham is to be patient and pleasant with everyone. He is soft-spoken and calm.

In contrast to wisdom, the accumulation of wealth often involves great risk and tension. Once wealth is acquired it imposes the burden of sleepless nights spent worrying about it, guarding it from thieves and securing it from the uncertainty of

changing market conditions.

וְכֹל דְּתִיבְתִּיהָ שְׁלוֹם:

And all its pathways are peace — וְכֹל דְּתִיבְתִּיהָ שְׁלוֹם. The foundation of the Torah is peace, which represents the reconciliation and harmonization of opposing forces. For example, reconciliation of differing views in learning leads to the profound satisfaction and joy of understanding the secrets of Hashem's universe.

(יח) עֵץ חַיִּים הִיא לַמְחֻזְקִים בָּהּ

וְתִמְכֶיהָ מֵאֲשֶׁר:

In contrast to the destructive nature of wealth, wisdom **is a tree of life**, whose health-giving properties assure a long life **to those who firmly take hold of it** — עֵץ חַיִּים הִיא לַמְחֻזְקִים בָּהּ. And **those who sustain it are assured of fulfillment** — וְתִמְכֶיהָ מֵאֲשֶׁר.

Sources

The primary sources used in the interpretation of the verses of this segment are listed below.

טז - רש"י, חנוך לנער, מלבי"ם	יג - רש"י, המאירי, רלב"ג, מצודות, הגר"א,
יז - רבינו בחיי, רלב"ג, אבן יחיאל, חנוך לנער,	שבט מיהודה
מצודות, שבט מיהודה	יד - רש"י, רלב"ג, חנוך לנער, מצודות
יח - רש"י, אבן עזרא, המאירי, אבן יחיאל, רשר"ה	טו - רש"י, אבן עזרא, המאירי, מלבי"ם

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