

## Mishlei 03-07

# Selfishness

## (3:27-30)

### Key Concepts

Wisdom teaches us that we have a major mission in life: to develop and maintain the quality of our *middos* (character traits) — those that affect our relationship with other people and those that affect our relationship with Hashem.

The *middah* of selfishness is a person's first *middah*, which Hashem gives him as soon as he is born. In his crucial first weeks it give him the motivation to grasp into himself the nutrients he needs to survive.

However, as he grows and acquires wisdom, he realizes that he must severely restrain his instinct for selfishness if he is to live at peace with other people and with Hashem. Then under the guidance of wisdom he must continue to develop his moral strength and overcome selfishness throughout his life.

### Exploring Mishlei

The nature of selfishness is such that it suppresses our sensitivity to the needs and concerns of others. In this segment, Mishlei provides us with four admonitions that help us recognize the presence of selfishness in our behavior. By promoting awareness of unrestrained selfishness in these four examples, Mishlei encourages to make a conscious effort to be on guard against its dangers in all its insidious forms throughout our lives.

**PART 1. OPEN EYES.** We know that it is a *mitzvah* to help people in need, but selfishness prevents us from perceiving how much they need our help and allows us to withhold that help, even when we can easily give it.

(כז) אֵל תִּמְנַע טוֹב מִבְּעַלְיוֹ בְּהִיּוֹת לְאֵל יָדָךְ לַעֲשׂוֹת:

(27) *Don't withhold a good from its owner whenever it is within your power to act.*

**PART 2. RESPECT.** Even when we have decided to help, selfishness allows us to treat the needy person with disrespect and tempts us to make him wait for it.

(כח) אַל תִּאמַר לְרֵעֶךָ לֵךְ וְשׁוּב וּמָחָר אֶתֶּן וְיֵשׁ אֵתְךָ:

(28) *Don't tell your fellow man, "Go and come back later; I will give it to you tomorrow," if it is in your possession.*

**PART 3. SENSITIVITY.** Selfishness coarsens our senses. As a result, we don't realize how cruel it is to make plans for taking steps against another person (even if justified), while pretending that he can trust the relationship we have built up together. We may be shocked later to realize the bitterness we have fostered by our lack of sensitivity.

(כט) אַל תַּחַרֵּשׁ עַל רֵעֶךָ רָעָה וְהוּא יוֹשֵׁב לְבֶטַח אֵתְךָ:

(29) *Don't plan harm against your fellow man while he feels confident [and trusting] with you.*

**PART 4. PURPOSELESS ARGUMENTS.** Selfishness allows us to disrespect another person while being overly sensitive about our own dignity. As a result we quickly get into purposeless arguments and feuds.

(ל) אַל תִּרְיַב עִם אָדָם חֲנָם אִם לֹא גִמְלָךְ רָעָה:

(30) *Don't get into an argument with a person for no purpose, if he has not harmed you.*

## Learning Mishlei

### PART 1. OPEN EYES.

(כז) אַל תִּמְנַע טוֹב מִבְּעַלְיוֹ

בְּהִיּוֹת לְאֵל יָדְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת:

**Don't withhold a good** — אַל תִּמְנַע טוֹב, such as a charitable donation, **from its true owner** — מִבְּעַלְיוֹ, that is, from the needy person who comes to you for help. You should help him in whatever way you can **whenever** you have it **within your power to do** it — בְּהִיּוֹת לְאֵל יָדְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת. Similarly, if you have Torah knowledge, don't withhold it from the person who asks you for help.

*You should go out of your way to grant a kindness to the person who needs it, as it says in the Torah, "Don't harden your heart." (Devarim 15:7 )*

PART 2. RESPECT.

(כח) אֵל תֹּאמֶר לְרֵעֶךָ  
 לֵךְ וְשׁוּב וּמָחָר אָתֶן  
 וַיֵּשׁ אֶתְךָ:

When you are able to do the proper thing, do it immediately. **Don't tell your fellow man** — אֵל תֹּאמֶר לְרֵעֶךָ, who asks you for help, or your employee who asks for his wages, **"Go away now and come back later — לֵךְ וְשׁוּב, I will give it to you tomorrow — וּמָחָר אָתֶן."** You are acting especially badly **if it is already in your possession** — וַיֵּשׁ אֶתְךָ. Besides betraying your obligation to him, you are demeaning him if you tell him to leave without giving him what he came for. Treat everyone with courtesy and respect.

PART 3. SENSITIVITY.

(כט) אֵל תִּחְרֹשׁ עַל רֵעֶךָ רָעָה  
 וְהוּא יוֹשֵׁב לְבֶטַח אֶתְךָ:

**Don't secretly plan harm against** the interests of **your fellow man** — אֵל תִּחְרֹשׁ of his relationship **with you** — אֶתְךָ **while he still feels confident** — וְהוּא יוֹשֵׁב לְבֶטַח of his relationship **with you** — אֶתְךָ. It would be especially cruel of you to betray his trust while he is blissfully unaware of your intentions. Furthermore, it would also be an act of falsehood, even if you are justified in the actions you are planning, such as to defend yourself and your honor. If you have issues with him, be open and let him know in an appropriate manner.

PART 4. PURPOSELESS ARGUMENTS.

(ל) אֵל תִּרְיֵב עִם אָדָם חִנָּם  
 אִם לֹא גִמְלָךְ רָעָה:

**Don't get into an argument with any person** — אֵל תִּרְיֵב עִם אָדָם **for no purpose** — חִנָּם, especially **if he has not harmed you** in any significant way — אִם לֹא גִמְלָךְ רָעָה.

## Sources

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

כט - רש"י, רבינו יונה  
ל - רש"י, הגר"א

כז - רש"י, רבינו יונה, המאירי, רלב"ג, אבן יחיאל  
כח - רש"י, אבן עזרא, רבינו יונה, מלבי"ם

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