

Mishlei 31-01

A Mother's Challenge

(31:1 - 31:9)

Key Concepts

This is the first segment of a chapter that addresses the role of women in Jewish life. The segment reflects the power of the Jewish mother to guide her children in reaching their potential and fulfilling their mission in life. The challenge of being a Jewish mother is demonstrated by the energy and wisdom that Bas Sheva put into her advice to King Shlomo after she was widowed.

Bas Sheva was inspired to admonish her son when she saw that the heady experience of royalty was distorting the clarity of mind that he needed to be an effective king. She challenged him to question himself and see that his behavior was being affected by the women that he married in fulfillment of his public role as a powerful king.

As a woman giving advice to her son, she was fully aware that men and woman have different ways of thinking and are meant to complement each other. The relationship between a husband and wife depends upon their having a positive influence on each other while still maintaining their own distinctive character. When the interaction between men and women becomes excessive, they begin to lose their own unique perspective and their influence upon each other loses its value, ultimately becoming harmful. Thus, she advised her son against overdoing the company of women.

Indirectly, Bas Sheva warned Shlomo against indulging in a love for luxury, which is characteristic of royalty and those exposed to great wealth. The royal style of living is commonly associated with the drinking of wine and other alcoholic beverages. This can be especially harmful since it directly affects a king's ability to maintain the clear head he needs to deal with the challenges of his role as judge and teacher of his people.

Being elevated to power is essential for a king to be able to govern his people and defend his kingdom but it also brings with it many destructive forces that are inherent in life at court. Bas Sheva knew this and she cautioned her son about it.

Exploring Mishlei

PART 1. A MOTHER'S REBUKE. Shlomo identifies himself as the author of this chapter, although he refers to himself as King Lemuel, meaning "for G-d." He begins by explaining that this first segment is actually a rebuke against his own behavior and his failure to live up to the mission implied by his title.

The rebuke was issued by his mother, Bas Sheva, when he showed signs of the bad influence of his new wife, the daughter of Pharaoh. Bas Sheva began by phrasing her rebuke in the form a series of questions, challenging him to think about what he was doing with his life. The fact that Shlomo had the courage to acknowledge her rebuke was an indication of his integrity and his humility. By sharing the rebuke with us in Mishlei, Shlomo has revealed an effective way to express an admonishment, that is, by issuing a challenge in the form of a question rather than a direct accusation.

(א) דְּבַרֵי לְמוֹאֵל מִלֶּדֶךָ מִשָּׂא אֲשֶׁר יִסְרַתְנוּ אִמּוֹ: (ב) מַה בְּרִי וּמַה בַּר בְּטָנִי וּמַה בֵּר נְדָרַי:

(1) The words of King Lemuel. The theme [is the rebuke with] which his mother admonished him: (2) What, my son? What, O son of my womb? And what O son of my vows?

PART 2. WOMEN AND WINE. Bas Sheva recognized two identifying factors in the changes that had come over her son. The first was allowing himself to be overly involved with the women of his life. She emphasized the weakening effect of excessive physical intimacy and she hinted at the emotional and spiritual deterioration which the wrong kind of woman can bring about.

The second factor, which became especially noticeable during the wedding celebration, was the influence of wine. She pointed out that alcoholic drinks interfere with the sobriety and clear thinking that a responsible leader must exhibit. Offering wine to a despondent person can be an act of kindness, but for one who is already in a joyful state, the wine can cloud his ability to act wisely.

(ג) אֵל תִּתֵּן לְנָשִׁים חֵילֶךָ וּדְרָכֶיךָ לְמַחֲוֹת מְלָכִין: (ד) אֵל לְמַלְכִים לְמוֹאֵל אֵל לְמַלְכִים שְׁתוּ יַיִן וּלְרוֹזְנִים אוּ אֵי שֶׁכָּר: (ה) פֶּן יִשְׁתָּה וְיִשְׁכַּח מִחֻקֶּךָ וְיִשְׁנָה דִין כָּל בְּנֵי עֲנִי: (ו) תִּנּוּ שֶׁכָּר לְאוֹבֵד וַיִּין לְמָרִי נֶפֶשׁ: (ז) יִשְׁתָּה וְיִשְׁכַּח רִישׁוֹ וַעֲמָלוֹ לֹא יִזְכָּר עוֹד:

(3) Don't give your strength to women, and your conduct to [drinking that] destroys kings. (4) Not for kings, O Lemuel. Not for kings is wine drinking.

And not for rulers is [to be asking] "Where is strong drink." (5) Lest he drink and forget [Moshe] the lawgiver, and [lest he] pervert judgment regarding any of the disadvantaged people. (6) Give strong drink to the wretched, and wine to the embittered soul. (7) Let him drink and forget his poverty and not remember his misery any more.

PART 3. ROYAL DUTY. Bas Sheva concludes her admonishment by reminding her son that he has an important mission to fulfill, a mission that requires clear thinking and devotion to integrity. That mission involves seeing to it that justice is done and speaking in defense of those who are unable to speak for themselves.

(ח) פֶּתַח פִּיךָ לְאֵלִים אֶל דִּין כָּל בְּנֵי חַלּוּף: (ט) פֶּתַח פִּיךָ שֹׁפֵט צְדָק וְדִין עֲנִי וְאֶבְיוֹן:
(8) *Open your mouth on behalf of the voiceless, in the judgment of any articulate people. (9) Open your mouth, judge righteously to see that justice is done for the poor and destitute.*

Learning Mishlei

PART 1. A MOTHER'S REBUKE.

(א) דְּבַרִי לְמוֹאֵל מְלֶךְ:
מִשָּׂא אֲשֶׁר יִסְרַתּוּ אִמּוֹ:

This chapter contains the **words of King** Shlomo, who is referred to here as **Lemuel**, meaning "for G-d" — דְּבַרִי לְמוֹאֵל מְלֶךְ. The initial **theme** is the rebuke with **which his mother** Bas Sheva **admonished him** — מִשָּׂא אֲשֶׁר יִסְרַתּוּ אִמּוֹ, after he celebrated his marriage to Pharaoh's daughter with more jubilation than he showed in celebrating his construction of the *Bais HaMikdash*. His mother feared he had become vulnerable to an inappropriate influence and said to him:

(ב) מַה בְּרִי

What are you doing, **my son** — מַה בְּרִי? You may be a great king, but you are still my son, and you need to listen to my wisdom. Since you are my son, you know that I am only concerned with your well-being.

וַיְמַה בֶּר בִּטְנִי
וַיְמַה בֶּר נְדָרִי:

And what are you doing, **O son of my womb** — וַיְמַה בֶּר בִּטְנִי? **And what** are you

doing, **O son of my vows** — וַיִּמְהַר בְּרִי נְדָרַי ? I made these vows before you were born, when I prayed for a son who would be zealous in his dedication to learning Torah and serving Hashem. But now I see signs of dissipation and sensuality in your behavior. My bond to you as your mother is greater than my loyalty to women in general and therefore, I am not reluctant to advise you to be careful about your relationships with women.

PART 2. WOMEN AND WINE.

(ג) אֵל תִּתֵּן לְנָשִׁים חַיִּלָּה
וְדַרְכֵיךָ לְמַחֹת מְלָכִין:

Don't give up your strength and stamina by allowing yourself to be attracted to **women** — אֵל תִּתֵּן לְנָשִׁים חַיִּלָּה that offer you the pleasures of intimacy. **And** don't give up **your conduct to** any other behavior such as excessive drinking that **destroys kings** — וְדַרְכֵיךָ לְמַחֹת מְלָכִין and men of responsibility. Use your energies wisely instead of squandering them in debauchery or in behavior that can disqualify you from sovereignty.

(ד) אֵל לְמְלָכִים לְמוֹאֵל
אֵל לְמְלָכִים שְׁתוּ יַיִן
וְלְרוֹזְנִים אֵי שֶׁכָּר:

It is **not for kings** — אֵל לְמְלָכִים You especially should realize this, my son **Lemuel** — לְמוֹאֵל, who is destined to be "for G-d". It is **not even for ordinary kings** to be given over to **drinking wine** — אֵל לְמְלָכִים שְׁתוּ יַיִן, and it is not even **for ordinary rulers** to ask "Where is the **strong drink** — וְלְרוֹזְנִים אֵי שֶׁכָּר". I prayed for a son who would be devoted to a special destiny of avodas Hashem and leadership of the Jewish Nation. Do not engage in behavior that interferes with your mission.

(ה) פֶּן יִשְׁתָּה וַיִּשְׁכַּח מִחֻקֶּךָ
וַיִּשְׁנֶה דִין כָּל בְּנֵי עֲנִי:

Lest he drink and forget Moshe, **the lawgiver** — פֶּן יִשְׁתָּה וַיִּשְׁכַּח מִחֻקֶּךָ, who taught that a person may not rule on Torah law while under the influence of liquor. For such a person may **pervert the judgment of any of the disadvantaged people** — וַיִּשְׁנֶה דִין כָּל בְּנֵי עֲנִי, who are unable to fight back against injustice.

(ו) תִּנּוּ שֵׁכָר לְאוֹבֵד
וַיִּין לְמָרִי נֶפֶשׁ:

Alcoholic drinks were created for a purpose, but not for you, my son. Instead, **give strong drink to the wretched** person — תִּנּוּ שֵׁכָר לְאוֹבֵד, who has lost hope. Such a person seeks to lose consciousness of his desperate situation. A mild intoxicant is not enough to wipe out his awareness of his tragic situation. **And give wine to those of embittered soul** — וַיִּין לְמָרִי נֶפֶשׁ, who need to be cheered up because of their poverty or because they are in mourning for a loved one.

(ז) יִשְׁתֶּה וַיִּשְׂכַּח רִישׁוֹ
וַעֲמָלוֹ לֹא יִזְכֹּר עוֹד:

Let him drink and forget his poverty — יִשְׁתֶּה וַיִּשְׂכַּח רִישׁוֹ at least for a while. **And let him not remember his misery any more** — וַעֲמָלוֹ לֹא יִזְכֹּר עוֹד so that he will not be handicapped by the memory of the burdens he had to face.

PART 3. ROYAL DUTY.

(ח) פִּתַּח פִּיךָ לְאֵלִים
אֶל דִּין כָּל בְּנֵי חֲלוּף:

If you refrain from drink, you will have a clear head and be able to perform your duty. Then you will be able to **open your mouth on behalf of the voiceless** — פִּתַּח פִּיךָ לְאֵלִים, who are unable to present their case in court. Take the initiative **in the judgment of any inarticulate people** — אֶל דִּין כָּל בְּנֵי חֲלוּף, who confuse one idea for another and prove incapable of arguing their case coherently.

(ט) פִּתַּח פִּיךָ שֹׁפֵט צְדָקָה
וְדִין עָנִי וְאַבְיוֹן:

Open your mouth, judge righteously — פִּתַּח פִּיךָ שֹׁפֵט צְדָקָה, to assure fair treatment for all who come before you. And go out of your way to **see that justice is done for the poor and destitute** — וְדִין עָנִי וְאַבְיוֹן.

Sources

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

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| ו - רש"י, רלב"ג, אלשיך, מלבי"ם | א - אבן עזרא, המאירי, אלשיך, מצודות, הגר"א |
| ז - אבן יחיא | ב - רש"י, רבינו יונה, חנוך לנער, מצודות |
| ח - מצודות | ג - רש"י, רלב"ג, חנוך לנער, מצודות |
| ט - מצודות | ד - רש"י, רלב"ג, אבן יחיא, הגר"א, |
| | ה - רלב"ג, הגר"א |

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