

Mishlei 31-02

A Woman of Character

(31:10 - 31:31)

Key Concepts

Shlomo Hamelech closes the book of Mishlei with a song of praise and appreciation for the Jewish woman. Here he views her as an idealized wife and mother, seen primarily from the perspective of her husband who is deeply grateful for the wonderful treasure granted to him by Hashem.

In the first chapter of Mishlei Shlomo had compared the Divine gift of wisdom to the idealized metaphor of a woman calling upon man to fulfill his potential. (See Segment 01-05.) In subsequent chapters Shlomo had pointed out how the powerful influence a woman can exert upon a man has the potential to destroy him if she is the wrong kind of woman. (See for example, Segment 02-03.) Now, in this final chapter of Mishlei Shlomo has reverted to the metaphor of a virtuous woman who urges a man to overcome his failings and rise to moral perfection.

He began the chapter with a message of admonishment from his own mother, Bas Sheva. She urgently advised him to resist the temptations inherent in his role as a great king. (See Segment 31-01.)

Now he turns his attention to an idealized image of the perfect Jewish woman and draws a word picture of the wonderful qualities that make her so appropriate for her mission as wife and mother. These qualities are the virtues of character (*middos*) which Shlomo describes in terms of the specific patterns of behavior that reflect those virtues. Of course, not every type of behavior is relevant to every woman. For example, the woman in this metaphor spends a good deal of time spinning flax and wool into yarn. She appears to be actively involved in generating income for her household and among her duties is the management of the household staff, which apparently includes a number of maids.

The important point is that even though the specific behaviors will be different for each woman, the underlying *middos* are universal, and every woman should aspire to attain them. Every man should see his wife as an embodiment of all the virtues as they fit her particular situation in life. In fact, he should hold himself to the same moral standards as those he has come to expect from her.

Exploring Mishlei

PART 1. A TRUE TREASURE. Mishlei introduces the ideal Jewish woman. In her husband's eyes she is unique, one of a kind. He is fortunate indeed to have been granted such a treasure. He would be foolish not to show her the appreciation and consideration appropriate to a Divine gift that he was found worthy of receiving.

(י) אִשָּׁת חַיִל מִי יִמְצָא וְרוּחַק מִפְּנִינִים מְכָרָהּ: (יא) בְּטַח בָּהּ לֵב בְּעֵלָהּ וְשָׁלָל לֹא יִחָסֵר: (יב) גִּמְלַתְהוּ טוֹב וְלֹא רָע כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיהָ:

(10) *A woman of character — fortunate [is the man] who finds her. Her value is far beyond pearls. (11) Her husband's heart relies on her. [When she is home], he will not suffer any loss. (12) She treats him with goodness and she is never vindictive, all the days of her life.*

PART 2. THE INGREDIENTS OF CHARACTER. A series of 14 behavior patterns is presented here, each of which is associated with an underlying moral virtue (*middah*).

(יג) דְּרָשָׁה צֹמֵר וּפְשָׁתִים וַתַּעַשׂ בְּחֹפֶץ כַּפֶּיהָ: (יד) הִיָּתָה פְּאֲנִיּוֹת סוּחַר מִמְּרוֹחַק תִּבְיָא לַחֲמָה: (טו) וַתִּקַּם בְּעוֹד לַיְלָה וַתִּתֵּן טָרֶף לְבֵיתָהּ וְרוּחַ לְנַעֲרֹתֶיהָ: (טז) זִמְמָה שָׂדֶה וַתִּקְחָהּ מִפְּרֵי כַּפֶּיהָ נָטַע נְטָעָה פָּרַם: (יז) חֲגָרָה בְּעוֹז מְתַנֶּיָּה וַתֵּאֱמַץ זְרַעוֹתֶיהָ: (יח) טַעֲמָה כִּי טוֹב סַחְרָה לֹא יִכְבֶּה בְּלִילָה נֶרָה: (יט) יָדֶיהָ שֶׁלְּחָה בְּכִישׁוֹר וְכַפֶּיהָ תִּמְכּוּ פֶלֶךְ: (כ) כַּפָּה פֶּרֶשָׁה לַעֲנִי וַיָּדֶיהָ שֶׁלְּחָה לְאַבְיוֹן: (כא) לֹא תִירָא לְבֵיתָהּ מִשָּׁלֵג כִּי כָּל בֵּיתָהּ לִבְשׁ שָׁנִים: (כב) מִרְבָּדִים עָשְׂתָה לָּהּ שֵׁשׁ וְאַרְגָּמָן לְבוּשָׁה: (כג) נוֹדַע בְּשַׁעְרִים בְּעֵלָה בְּשִׁבְתּוֹ עִם זִקְנֵי אֶרֶץ: (כד) סָדִין עָשְׂתָה וַתִּמְכֹּר וְחֲגוּר נָתַנָּה לְפִנְעָנִי: (כה) עֹז וְהָדָר לְבוּשָׁה וַתִּשְׁחַק לְיוֹם אַחֲרוֹן: (כו) פִּיהָ פְּתָחָה בְּחֲכָמָה וַתוֹרֵת חֶסֶד עַל לְשׁוֹנָה: (כז) צוּפִיָּה הִלִּיכוֹת בֵּיתָהּ וְלֶחֶם עֲצָלוֹת לֹא תֹאכַל:

(13) **Industrious.** *[When she has time on her hands] she looks for [raw] wool and flax, and her hands work eagerly [to spin them into yarn].*

(14) **Innovative.** *She has become like the ships of a merchant, getting her sustenance from afar.*

(15) **Conscientious.** *She gets up while it is still night, preparing food for her*

household and giving work assignments to her maids.

(16) **Persevering.** *She envisions a field and she buys it. From the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.*

(17) **Determined.** *She girds herself with strength and empowers her arms.*

(18) **Learns from Experience.** *[When] she discerns that her endeavor is good, her lamp is not snuffed out at nightfall.*

(19) **Generous and Thoughtful.** *[Even] when she is [busy at the spinning wheel] with her hands stretching out to the distaff and her palms supporting the spindle, she thinks of the needy. (20) She opens her palms to the person and stretches out her hands to the destitute.*

(21) **Responsible.** *She has no fear for her family because of snow because [the members of] her household are [warmly] clothed in scarlet wool.*

(22) **Judicious.** *She has made for herself elegant bedcovers for herself; linen and purple wool are her clothing.*

(23) **Devoted.** *Because of her support her husband is distinctive in the councils when he sits with the elders of the land.*

(24) **Effective.** *She makes cloth and sells [it]. She delivers a belt to the itinerant trader.*

(25) **Righteous.** *Her garb is [moral] strength and beauty [of character]. She smiles to the last day.*

(26) **Wise and Inspiring.** *She opens her mouth with wisdom for the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.*

(27) **Vigilant.** *She observes the ways of her household. She does not eat the bread of laziness.*

PART 3. ETERNAL VALUE. The song comes to a majestic conclusion with the recognition granted to the virtuous Jewish woman by her grateful husband and children.

כח) קמוּ בְּנֵיהָ וַיֹּאשְׁרוּהָ בְּעֶלְהָ וַיְהַלְלֶהָ: (כט) רַבּוֹת בְּנוֹת עָשׂוּ חֵיל וְאִתָּה עָלִית עַל

בְּלִנְהָ: (ל) שֶׁקֶר הַחֵן וְהַבֵּל הַיָּפִי אִשָּׁה יֵרָאֵת ה' הִיא תִתְהַלֵּל: (לא) וַתִּגְדֹּל לָהּ מִפְּרֵי יְדֶיהָ וַיִּהְיֶה לָּהּ בְּשִׁעָרִים מַעֲשֵׂיהָ:

(28) Her children have arisen and praised her [in gratitude]. Her husband has extolled her [in appreciation]. (29) “Many women have achieved [virtues] of character, but you have surpassed them all. (30) [Superficial] charm is false and [physical] beauty is of no lasting value. A woman who fears Hashem, she should be praised. (30) Give her the fruits of her hands and let her be praised in the gates by her very own deeds.”

Learning Mishlei

PART 1. A TRUE TREASURE.

(י) אִשֶּׁת חַיִּל מִי יִמְצָא

A woman of character — אִשֶּׁת חַיִּל is the ideal wife and homemaker. Fortunate indeed is the man **who finds** her — מִי יִמְצָא, for she is a gift to him from Hashem. Every man should aspire to be worthy of being blessed with such a woman at the center of his life.

וְרַחֵק מִפְּנִינִים מְכָרָה:

Her value is far beyond pearls — וְרַחֵק מִפְּנִינִים מְכָרָה, for she is a priceless treasure to her husband.

(יא) בָּטַח בָּהּ לֵב בְּעֵלָהּ

וְשָׁלַל לֹא יִחָסֵר:

He continues to be impressed by her conscientiousness, integrity, and competence, and so **her husband's heart relies on her** — בָּטַח בָּהּ לֵב בְּעֵלָהּ completely, trusting her with his deepest secrets and relying on her to keep all activities of the household within the boundaries of *halachah*. Even when he must be away from home he knows that she will do whatever is necessary to guard the well-being of the family. He is assured that when she is at the center of his home, **he will not suffer any material loss** — וְשָׁלַל לֹא יִחָסֵר.

גְּמַלְתָּהּ טוֹב וְלֹא רָע

כל ימי חייה:

She always treats him with goodness – וְגַמְלָתָהּ טוֹב, **and** even when he has behaved badly, **she is never vindictive** – וְלֹא רָע, for she is a forgiving person, **all the days of her life** – כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיהָ, in good times and bad times, in youth and old age.

PART 2. THE INGREDIENTS OF CHARACTER.

(יג) דָּרְשָׁה צֹמֶר וּפְשֵׁתִים

וַתַּעַשׂ בְּחֹפֶץ כַּפֵּיהָ:

She is industrious and cannot bear to be idle. When she has time on her hands **she looks for wool and flax** – דָּרְשָׁה צֹמֶר וּפְשֵׁתִים, **and her hands work eagerly** – וַתַּעַשׂ בְּחֹפֶץ כַּפֵּיהָ to spin the raw materials into wool and linen yarn.

(יד) הִיָּתְהָ כְּאֶנְיוֹת סוֹחֵר

מִמְרָחֵק תָּבִיא לַחֲמָה:

She is innovative and plans ahead for every contingency. She even arranges to get food for her household at the time and place that prices are advantageous. **She has become like the ships of an enterprising merchant** – הִיָּתְהָ כְּאֶנְיוֹת סוֹחֵר, **getting her sustenance from afar** – מִמְרָחֵק תָּבִיא לַחֲמָה.

(טו) וַתִּקֶּם בְּעוֹד לַיְלָה

וַתִּתֵּן טָרֶף לְבֵיתָהּ וְחֶק לְנַעֲרֹתֶיהָ:

She is conscientious and dedicated to the well-being of her family. Each morning **she gets up while it is still night** – וַתִּקֶּם בְּעוֹד לַיְלָה **and prepares food for her household** – וַתִּתֵּן טָרֶף לְבֵיתָהּ. While doing her own work, she gives **work assignments to her maids** – וְחֶק לְנַעֲרֹתֶיהָ .

(טז) זָמְמָה שָׂדֵה וַתִּקְחָהּ

מִפְרֵי כַּפֵּיהָ נֹטַע נֹטְעָה כָּרֶם:

A woman of vision and perseverance, she sets her mind on a goal and does not deviate from it until she has achieved it. For example, **she envisions owning a field** – זָמְמָה שָׂדֵה and when through constant thrift she has saved up enough money, **she buys it** – וַתִּקְחָהּ. She works the field and then, **from the fruit of the work of her hands she plants a vineyard** – מִפְרֵי כַּפֵּיהָ נֹטְעָה כָּרֶם.

(יז) חֲגָרָה בְּעוֹז מְתַנֶּיָּה
וּתְאַמֵּץ זְרָעוֹתֶיהָ:

She focuses her energies on the task at hand, gaining strength from her determination to succeed. **She girds herself with the strength** – חֲגָרָה בְּעוֹז – **of her willpower and empowers her arms** – וּתְאַמֵּץ זְרָעוֹתֶיהָ – with her zeal and her sense of duty.

(יח) טַעַמָּה כִּי טוֹב סַחְרָה
לֹא יִכְבֶּה בַלַּיִל בְּלִילָה נֶרָה:

She learns from experience and when **she discerns that her endeavor is good** – טַעַמָּה כִּי טוֹב סַחְרָה – she follows through, giving it her all, so that **her lamp is not snuffed out at nightfall** – לֹא יִכְבֶּה בַלַּיִל בְּלִילָה נֶרָה.

(יט) יָדֶיהָ שְׁלָחָה בְּכִישׁוֹר
וּכְפִיָּהּ תִּמְכּוּ פְּלֶדָ:

Although often engrossed in her work, she does not neglect those who need her help. Thus, when she is spinning yarn and **she is busy stretching out her hands to the distaff** – יָדֶיהָ שְׁלָחָה בְּכִישׁוֹר (the stick that holds the unspun flax or wool) **and her palms are supporting the spindle** – וּכְפִיָּהּ תִּמְכּוּ פְּלֶדָ (onto which the spun yarn is wound), she is sensitive to those in need.

(כ) כַּפָּה פֹּרְשָׁה לְעָנִי
וַיִּדְּיָהּ שְׁלָחָה לְאַבְיוֹן:

She does not keep the needy waiting but responds immediately. **She opens her palm to the poor person** – כַּפָּה פֹּרְשָׁה לְעָנִי, who ask for her help, **and she stretches out her hands to the destitute person** – וַיִּדְּיָהּ שְׁלָחָה לְאַבְיוֹן, who is too ashamed to ask.

(כא) לֹא תִירָא לְבֵיתָהּ מִשֶּׁלֶג
כִּי כָּל בֵּיתָהּ לְבָשׁ שָׁנִים:

Her care for the needy does not come at the cost of her devotion to her family. Thus, in the winter **she has no fear for her household** suffering from cold and snow – לֹא תִירָא לְבֵיתָהּ מִשֶּׁלֶג, **because all the members of her household are clothed in heat-retaining scarlet wool** – כִּי כָּל בֵּיתָהּ לְבָשׁ שָׁנִים.

(כב) מְרַבְּדִים עֲשֵׂתָהּ לָהּ
שֵׁשׁ וְאַרְגָּמָן לְבוּשָׁהּ:

She furnishes her home and dresses with discretion. She makes what she can, and chooses items that are appropriate to her station in life and the society in which she lives. **She has made elegant bedcovers for herself – מְרַבְּדִים עֲשֵׂתָהּ לָהּ; linen and purple wool are the materials she has selected for her clothing – שֵׁשׁ וְאַרְגָּמָן לְבוּשָׁהּ.**

(כג) נוֹדֵעַ בְּשַׁעֲרֵים בַּעֲלָהּ
בְּשִׁבְתּוֹ עִם זְקֵנֵי אֶרֶץ:

She acts with unselfishness and devotion to help her husband assume a prominent role in the affairs of the community, subtly offering him the benefit of her own counsel. As a result, **her husband is distinctive in the councils – נוֹדֵעַ בְּשַׁעֲרֵים – בַּעֲלָהּ** of the community, enhanced by the fine clothing that she provides for him to wear **as he sits with the elders of the land – בְּשִׁבְתּוֹ עִם זְקֵנֵי אֶרֶץ.**

(כד) סָדִין עֲשֵׂתָהּ וְתַמְכָּר
וְחַגּוֹר נְתָנָה לְכַנְעֵנִי:

Through her effective management of the household, she frees her husband from financial worries and helps him devote more time to Torah study. **She makes cloth** from the yarn that she has spun **and sells** her output – **סָדִין עֲשֵׂתָהּ וְתַמְכָּר** to generate income for the family. She also fashions the cloth into items of clothing to be marketed to the public. Thus, **she delivers** many **a belt to the itinerant trader – וְחַגּוֹר נְתָנָה לְכַנְעֵנִי**, who sells it for her in other cities.

(כה) עוֹ וְהֶדְר לְבוּשָׁהּ
וְתִשְׂחַק לְיוֹם אַחֲרוֹן:

Although the needs of her family require that she spend much of her time in the production of clothing, **her true garb** in a spiritual sense **is** formed by her moral **strength and beauty** of character – **עוֹ וְהֶדְר לְבוּשָׁהּ**. She joyfully greets each day with the knowledge of all the good she is doing for her family and the community. **And so she smiles** happily even **to the last day** of her life – **וְתִשְׂחַק לְיוֹם אַחֲרוֹן.**

(כו) פִּיהָ פְּתִיחָה בְּחִכָּמָהּ
וְתוֹרַת חֶסֶד עַל לְשׁוֹנָהּ:

Her positive influence goes far beyond her physical deeds and the example she presents to others. When **she opens her mouth** it is **with wisdom** – **פִּיהָ פִּתְחָהּ** **וְתוֹרַת חָסֵד עַל – בְּחֻמָּהּ**, for the teaching of kindness is on her tongue – **לְשׁוֹנָהּ**.

(כז) צוֹפִיָּה [הִילְכוֹת] הִלְיָכוֹת בֵּיתָהּ
וְלֶחֶם עֲצָלוֹת לֹא תֹאכַל:

She understands the weakness of human nature and so she does not take it for granted that everything will be done as it should be. And so **she** continually **observes the ways of her household** – **צוֹפִיָּה הִלְיָכוֹת בֵּיתָהּ** to ensure that the standards of modesty and integrity of *halachah* are being met. **She does not eat the bread of laziness** – **וְלֶחֶם עֲצָלוֹת לֹא תֹאכַל** but feels a sense of personal responsibility that all will be done as it should be. And so she tries to anticipate future needs and problems.

PART 3. ETERNAL VALUE.

(כח) קָמוּ בְנֵיהָ וַיְאָשְׁרוּהָ
בְּעֵלָהּ וַיְהַלְלֶהּ:

Although she does not advertise her accomplishments, her qualities are evident to those who know her, especially the immediate members of her family. **Her children have risen and praised her** – **קָמוּ בְנֵיהָ וַיְאָשְׁרוּהָ** in gratitude for taking care of all their needs. **Her husband** understands what a treasure he has, and so he **has extolled her** – **בְּעֵלָהּ וַיְהַלְלֶהּ** to let her know how much he appreciates her. What do they say?

(כט) רַבּוֹת בְּנוֹת עָשׂוּ חַיִּל
וְאַתְּ עָלִית עַל כֻּלָּנָהּ:

"**Many women have achieved** individual virtues of **character** – **רַבּוֹת בְּנוֹת עָשׂוּ חַיִּל**, **but you have surpassed them all** – **וְאַתְּ עָלִית עַל כֻּלָּנָהּ** because you have excelled in every virtue."

(ל) שֶׁקֶר הַחַן וְהַבֵּל הַיָּפִי
אִשָּׁה יִרְאֵת ה' הִיא תִתְהַלֵּל:

"Don't praise a person for the qualities that were given to him by Hashem, but for the *middos* of character that he developed through his own efforts. **Charm is false and beauty is of no lasting value** – **שֶׁקֶר הַחַן וְהַבֵּל הַיָּפִי**, for they fade in time

and are gone. **A woman who fears Hashem, she should be praised – אִשָּׁה** יִרְאַת ה' היא תִּתְהַלֵּל for her achievements in the service of her Creator are everlasting .”

(לא) תִּנּוּ לָהּ מִפְּרֵי יָדֶיהָ
וַיִּהְיֶה לָּהּ בְּשַׁעְרֵים מַעֲשֵׂיהָ:

“**Give her the fruits of her hands – תִּנּוּ לָהּ מִפְּרֵי יָדֶיהָ**. Let her see *naches* from what she he has built and what she has sacrificed. **And let her be praised in the gates of the city by her very own deeds – וַיִּהְיֶה לָּהּ בְּשַׁעְרֵים מַעֲשֵׂיהָ**. The memory of what she has been and done will live on forever in the hearts of her husband and her children. Her memory will live on, too, in the hearts of all her community as a valiant example to be followed by future generations.”

Additional Thoughts

This segment begins by describing its subject as an **אִשָּׁת חַיִל**, a term that is often translated as “woman of valor” or “woman of accomplishment”. Rav Shmshon Rafael Hirsch defines **חַיִל** as a general term which refers to an accumulation of resources. These could be possessions, power, moral virtues, or wisdom. It is likely that Yisro was referring to all of these qualities in varying degrees when he advised Moshe Rabbeinu, **אֶתְּהָ תִּחְיֶזֶה מִכָּל הָעָם אֲנָשֵׁי חַיִל** - “You should seek out from all the people men of ability” (*Shemos* 18:21). In our context, the accumulation of qualities that define an ideal woman are headed by moral character (*middos*) and therefore we have translated **חַיִל** as “woman of character”

Sources

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

יב - המאירי, מצודות, מלבי"ם
יג - אבן עזרא, המאירי, רשר"ה

י - המאירי, חנוך לנער, מצודות
יא - חנוך לנער, אלשיך, רשר"ה

כג - המאירי, חנוך לנער, מצודות, רשר"ה
כד - רלב"ג, מצודות
כה - רש"י, אבן עזרא, רשר"ה
כו - המאירי, חנוך לנער, מצודות
כז - רש"י, המאירי, חנוך לנער, מצודות
כח - המאירי, מצודות
כט - רש"י, חנוך לנער,
ל - רש"י, חנוך לנער
לא - רש"י, מלב"ם, רשר"ה

יד - המאירי, חנוך לנער, מצודות
טו - המאירי, חנוך לנער, רשר"ה
טז - המאירי, מצודות, רשר"ה
יז - רבינו יונה, המאירי, רלב"ג, חנוך לנער, רשר"ה
יח - רלב"ג, חנוך לנער, מצודות
יט - רש"י, רלב"ג
כ - המאירי, מצודות
כא - רש"י, מצודות,
כב - חנוך לנער, מצודות

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