

Mishlei 10-17

Intervention

Key Concepts

Over a period of time it is natural for a person to fall into a comfortable pattern of behavior in which he resists change. However, in doing so he is neglecting his mission in life, which is to perfect his moral character and acquire wisdom.

Accordingly, from time to time, Hashem intervenes in the smooth flow of events and injects customized lessons to remind a person of his failings and to encourage him to elevate himself to the next stage of spiritual growth.

Such a lesson may be in the form of an experience of pain or discomfort. It may also involve witnessing an unusual event or being exposed to an enlightening teaching.

Mishlei uses two terms to address such interventions. The first is *mussar* (moral discipline) and the second is *tochachah* (reproof or rebuke). In general, *mussar* is related to the idea of the correction of past errors. It emphasizes a person's *middos* (moral character) and suggests the deterrent power of punishment either through actual suffering or through self-analysis. In contrast, *tochachah* refers to a gentle admonition or reproof, resulting in a motivation to future goodness and spiritual growth.

Exploring Mishlei

(יז) אֶרַח לְחַיִּים שׁוֹמֵר מוֹסֵר וְעֹזֵב תּוֹכַחַת מִתְּעָה :

(17) He who holds on to moral discipline (mussar) is on the path to life but he who forsakes reproof (tochachah) goes astray.

The interventions of *mussar* (moral discipline) and *tochachah* (reproof) are contrasted with respect to their effect on a person's trajectory through life. If a person holds on to *mussar* and overcomes his instinctive resistance to being corrected, he puts himself solidly on the path to life. If a person fails to react positively to the reproof of a parent or teacher, he is in effect resisting the opportunity to grow spiritually. He is effectively forsaking the path to life and going astray.

What type of person resists *mussar*? We have seen this in Mishlei 01-07, which states that skeptics scorn both wisdom and *mussar*. However, Mishlei is directing his attention to the basically good person when he tells him lovingly in Mishlei 03-11 respond positively to both *mussar* and *tochachah*. Further on, in Mishlei 06-20 (verse 06:23),

Mishlei relates these concepts to the persons's way of life. Only through energetic self-control of *middos* will a person be able to properly implement Torah and *mitzvos*.

Learning Mishlei

The person that **holds on to** the lessons of **mussar** – שומר מוסר – with a constructive attitude will be placed **on the path to life** – ארח לחיים –

But if he even **forsakes** the **reproof of tochachah** – ועוזב תוכחת – he will lose the opportunity of entering on the path to life and **will even go astray** – מתענה – on the path to destruction.

Additional Insights

THE PATH TO LIFE

- (1) The lessons of *mussar* are directed to the improvement of *middos*. The person who who takes these lessons to heart walks on the road to eternal life. He is enabled to achieve fulfillment in his *mitzvos* and he becomes beloved by other human beings. (המאירי, רלב"ג)
- (2) Priority should be given to perfecting one's *middos*. (See Mishlei 01-02) This lesson puts one on the right road to learning Torah. But if he learns Torah first, without the foundation of good *middos*, he will go astray. (חנוך לנער)
- (3) The term *mussar* refers to self-discipline and restraint from violating strict boundaries. (מלבים)
- (4) The term *mussar* can also refer to physical discomfort which a person can impose upon himself through self-discipline or that others can impose upon him. In either case, such suffering purifies a person and elevates him. (הגר"א)

GOING ASTRAY

- (5) The person who turns away from the lessons of *mussar* leads his teachers astray because they get discouraged and as a result, they neglect their duty of giving him guidance. (המאירי)
- (6) The person who rejects *mussar* will surely go astray because he hates being told what to do and so he ends up following the whims of his heart. (הגר"א)

(7) To avoid going astray a person should readily accept reproof based on the enlightenment of reason. In this mode of guidance, a person's mentor shows him the benefits of choosing the right way in life. (מלבים)