

Mishlei 10-19

Virtues of Silence

Key Concepts

This proverb contrasts the virtues of speech with the virtues of silence. As we have seen in a previous proverb (Segment 10-11) the ability to speak can be a great blessing. In fact, when exercised by a righteous person, the power of speech is equivalent to the source of life. However, as valuable as it is, speech needs to be tempered by moments of silence. A continuous flow of speech can lead to great harm because the ability to think can be severely handicapped during the time that a person is actually speaking. In order to be sure that what he says is appropriate, he needs to stop and think. The time he spends thinking and not talking is probably even more of a blessing.

Exploring Mishlei

(יט) בָּרַב דְּבָרִים לֹא יִחְדַּל פֶּשַׁע וְחֹשֶׁךְ שְׂפָתָיו מְשַׁכֵּיל :

(19) Where there is much talking sin cannot be avoided, but one who restrains his lips is intelligent.

Under the best of circumstances, a person should be very careful to avoid excessive talking because speech is a powerful instrument that can cause deadly harm. Besides the sins of slander and gossip, carelessly chosen words can be very hurtful and can be the cause of endless quarrel. The only way to avoid these dangers is to think carefully before speaking. That requirement can only be properly fulfilled through periods of silence. Therefore, the person who restrains his lips to give him time to think is demonstrating intelligence.

The previous proverb (Segment 10-18) commented on the use of speech in a situation where an individual has been treated unfairly. In such a case, silence can be a cover-up for resentment and so silent lips are seen as false lips. The opposite of silence in such a situation can also be harmful because the words spoken by an angry person can rapidly lead to all the sins of which speech is capable.

Learning Mishlei

**Where there is much talking – בְּרֹב דְבָרִים –
sin cannot be avoided – לֹא יִחָדֵל פְּשָׁע**

because it is difficult to think and talk at the same time.

**But one who restrains his lips – וְחֹשֶׁךְ שִׁפְתָיו –
is wise – מְשֻׁכֵּל,**

because a person needs quiet moments to ensure that what he is going to say is correct and appropriate.

Additional Insights

EXCESSIVE TALK

(1) Once spoken, words can never be recalled and the harm done by careless talk is permanent. (אבן עזרא)

(2) Avoid excessive speech because it is not possible to properly weigh one's words while speaking. (רבינו יונה, מצודות)

(3) Even a wise man who speaks with wisdom should not speak excessively, because the tongue can easily slip. (המאירי)

(4) Don't believe good words, believe actual deeds. Some people use words to hide their true feelings, as was the case when Ephron responded to Avraham's request for a burial place for Sarah (Bereishis 23:11). (אבן יחיאל)

SELF-RESTRAINT

(5) A person who exercises self-restraint in speech is using his intelligence, as opposed to the person who uses speech foolishly. That person was described in the previous proverb as a fool. (אבן עזרא)

(6) Intelligence is that faculty which enables a person to think through a subject, leading ultimately to understanding. Therefore, a person with intelligence will restrain his lips so that he can take time to think. (אבן עזרא, רבינו יונה)