

Mishlei 10-21

Guidance

Key Concepts

Life is filled with uncertainties and challenges and so everyone is in need of guidance to a greater or lesser degree. A righteous person (*tzadik*) who has worked for years to acquire and develop wisdom is uniquely qualified to offer inspirational guidance to others. A measure of his own spiritual elevation is the level of certainty he brings to his beliefs and teachings. This certainty is also essential to his ability to influence others. Thus, he is effective as a spiritual guide once his perspective rises above that of the foolish people who build their thinking around skepticism and uncertainty. Guidance based on such thinking will inevitably lead one's listeners astray.

Exploring Mishlei

(כא) שִׁפְתֵי צַדִּיק יִרְעוּ רַבִּים וְאֹיְלִים בְּחֶסֶר לֵב יָמוּתוּ:

(21) The lips of the *tzadik* feed the multitudes, but skeptical fools will die with a deficient heart.

The lips are the final point in the physical flow of speech to the listener. Thus, the speaker's lips represent the knowledge that he conveys. The words uttered by his lips are the ones that the listener hears. In this proverb Mishlei tells us that if the speaker is a *tzadik* and his lips communicate concepts of certainty and truth, those concepts will be effective spiritual food for the multitudes that come to hear him.

The *tzadik* is contrasted with foolish people whose approach to wisdom is one of skepticism and uncertainty. Such people lack the essential grounding of wisdom that the *tzadik* has worked so hard to achieve. That lack is characterized by their deficient heart. In what way is it deficient? As previously observed (Segment 10-13), a person's heart is deficient if he has not trained his heart to work closely with his intelligence. This results in a tendency to skepticism and uncertainty, which lead others astray.

Learning Mishlei

The lips of the *tzadik* — שִׁפְתֵי צַדִּיק ,

expound his wisdom with certainty.

Those words feed the multitudes — יִרְעוּ רַבִּים

with positive inspiration. But skeptical fools — וְאֹיִלִים

lack the authentic wisdom needed to provide meaningful guidance.

Because of their deficient heart — בְּחֶסֶר לֵב

their guidance is ineffective and

instead of finding eternal life, they will die — מוֹתוּ

without ever having gained the certainty of true wisdom.

Additional Insights

THE LIPS OF THE TZADIK

(1) The *tzadik* who teaches wisdom to the people is like a shepherd who feeds his flock. He teaches them the way that will benefit them in this life and the next. (אבן עזרא, מצודות)

(2) Not only does the wisdom of his lips bring life to the *tzadik*, it brings life to those who follow him. (רלב"ג)

(3) The multitudes guided by the *tzadik* include great scholars for the word *rabim* refers not only to numbers but to their greatness. They are eager to hear his wisdom. (הגר"א)

(4) Whereas the tongue symbolizes internal speech that reflects the current thoughts of the speaker, the lips symbolize speech that is external and reflects conclusions that the speaker has reached over a period of time. These make a positive impression because they are expressed with certainty and clarity. (מלבי"ם)

THE HEART OF THE FOOL

(5) The skeptical fool has a deficient heart and the people who follow his misguided teachings will be led astray. (אבן עזרא, המאירי)

(6) The skeptical fools fail to help others and bring destruction to themselves. (אבן יחי"א, חנוך לנער)

(7) The wrong which is done in the world is often due to lack of understanding. This means morally instructive words can make a big difference and raise foolish people from their confusion. (רשר"ה)