

Mishlei 10-26

Laziness

Key Concepts

We were put into this world to be active. This means we should measure our life by our accomplishments, especially in terms of the *mitzvos* we do and the changes we make to ourselves as we develop our character. We come into this world with a mission, which is unique to each of us and which we discover as we go through life. Our mission demands all our energies and all our dedication. This means we may not coast through life, leaving it for others to do what has to be done.

The dedication and energetic commitment to fulfilling our daily mission is referred to as *zerizus* (alacrity). Visible signs of *zerizus* in action are promptness in starting any task and actively following through to make sure it is completed in a timely fashion. Although rest is essential, it must always be viewed as an opportunity to recharge our batteries as we prepare for the next task ahead. The opposite of *zerizus* is *atzlus* (laziness), which is the subject of this proverb and many others in *Mishlei*.

The proverb suggests that we view ourselves as a faithful employee or servant who receives specific tasks to fulfill. The lazy worker fails to give the task ahead his full energies. As a result, it does not get completed properly and on time. Thus, the employer's expectations and fond hopes of a successful outcome are disappointed. That symbolic employer may be thought of as Hashem. It may also be the person himself, who goes through life setting goals and working to meet them.

Exploring Mishlei

(כו) כַּחֲמֵץ לְשֵׁנִים וְכַעֲשָׂן לְעֵינָיִם כֵּן הָעֵצֶל לְשֹׁלְחָיו:

**(26) Like vinegar to the teeth and like smoke to the eyes,
so is a lazy man to those who send him.**

The proverb emphasizes that a person who approaches a task with laziness will likely cause harm instead of the anticipated benefit the task was supposed to provide. Two vivid examples are given of optimistic hopes that are dashed. One is

vinegar which can have a positive value as a food, but which can also cause harm to the teeth. The other example is smoke which harms the eyes, even though it preserves food and comes from a warming fire.

Previously, in Segment 10-05, we have seen how laziness can cause economic harm to a farmer who neglects the attention that he should be giving to the seasonal demands of raising crops. Earlier in Segment 6-06 we have seen how a lazy person uses wishful thinking to foolishly evade the demands that are made upon him.

Learning Mishlei

(כו) כַּחמֶץ לְשֵׁנִים וְקֶשֶׁן לְעֵינַיִם כִּן הָעֵצֶל לְשִׁלְחָיו:

**(26) Like vinegar, which is harmful to the teeth — כַּחמֶץ לְשֵׁנִים
and like smoke, which is harmful to the eyes — וְקֶשֶׁן לְעֵינַיִם,
so is a lazy man to those who send him — כִּן הָעֵצֶל לְשִׁלְחָיו.**

If he performed his mission energetically, those who send him will be grateful, but if he is negligent, he can do more harm than good.

Additional Insights

VINEGAR

(1) Vinegar can be used as a food or medication, but it can also cause harm to the teeth. This harm may be greater than the health benefit or food value of the substance. (רבינו יונה, המאירי, הגר"א)

(2) Vinegar can be used as a means to make food appetizing, but can also cause pain to the teeth. Not only does the person not get the benefit of improved appetite, the pain may cause him to lose his interest in food altogether. (הגר"א)

SMOKE

(3) When a person lights a fire to gain warmth, the harm done to his eyes by the smoke may be worse than the benefits he receives from the heat. (המאירי)

(4) A person may make a fire for light, but if the wood is damp, there will be much smoke. Not only will it interfere with the light, it will cause pain to his eyes. (הגר"א)

THE MISSION

(5) There are times when a mission is important and the sender takes a risk, hoping that his agent will be dedicated and will carry out the mission to completion. It is up to the agent to listen carefully to his instructions and carry them out conscientiously and promptly. Even if the agent is known to be negligent, he may be the only person available, and so the sender must hope for the best. (רבינו יונה)

(6) How is this proverb related to the proverbs dealing with a tzaddik and a rasha? Every Jew is sent by Hashem to do mitzvos and develop his middos. If he fails to do this energetically, the result will be incomplete, and he may cause harm to his own soul. Even if he does the mitzvah, the negative aspects to what he has done may be more consequential than the positive aspects. (רבינו יונה, רבינו בחיי, מלבי"ם)

(7). Just as vinegar harms the teeth, so does the lazy man harm those who send him, because the sender was counting on him and he is now disappointed. (מצודות, הגר"א)

(8) When a person has a tooth ache he is willing to take the vinegar as a medication because he is willing to endure the side effects in order to gain the healing benefits. Similarly, if the mission is urgent, the sender may have no choice but to send someone who he knows is lazy. When the agent comes back to report on the result of the mission, there may be many tears on the part of the sender, corresponding to the tears one gets from a smoky fire. (שבט מיהודה)

(9) When the lazy man takes on a mission he procrastinates and so the mission is behind schedule from the beginning. Then he takes it easy and works slowly. As a result the mission does not get finished on time. (אלשיך)