

Mishlei 11-12

Contempt

Key Concepts

It is a general failure of character to look down upon another person, no matter how lowly. It is also unwise because no one knows what the future holds. Even if the other person seems unlearned and inconsequential, no one can be sure that his situation won't change due to his own initiative or an unexpected event. The wisest choice is to avoid disparaging anyone and avoid taking any steps that you may regret. This is also the advice of the *Mishnah* in *Avos* 4, 3: "Do not be scornful of any person."

Exploring Mishlei

(יב) בְּזִלְזוּתוֹ חָסַר לֵב וְאִישׁ תְּבוּנוֹת יַחְרִישׁ :

(12) *He who shows contempt for his fellow lacks good sense, but a man of discernment will quietly reflect.*

To look down on another person shows a lack of humility, but in this proverb Mishlei also addresses the practical implications of such behavior. Disparaging another person is a failure of good sense because no one can foresee that the other individual may gain a position of power at some time in the future, a position when his goodwill might be essential. Thus, even if it is only for practical reasons, one should carefully reflect on future possibilities and avoid making any kind of statement that shows lack of respect for another individual.

The term that Mishlei uses to describe a person who fails to reflect adequately upon future possibilities is "*chasar lev*", that is, a person with "a deficient heart". This term is based on the concept of the heart as the inner self of a person that directs his actions. A person with self-control has trained his heart to be guided by his wisdom. He is then referred to as a *chacham lev* (wise of heart). Without this guidance, the person follows the passions of the moment. He is then said to have a deficient heart. The last time we have seen this expression was in Segment 10-13 where Mishlei reminded us that a person lacking self-discipline may need external correction.

Learning Mishlei

(12) *He who shows contempt for his fellow — בְּזִלְרֵעֵהוּ — lacks good sense, — חֲסֵר־לֵב, but a man of discernment — וְאִישׁ תְּבוּנֹת will quietly reflect. — יַחְרִישׁ*

Additional Insights

- (1) Disparaging another person is an indication of a deficient heart for it demonstrates his lack of good *middos* and at the same time his lack of good sense. (רבינו יונה)
- (2) Scorning another person especially demonstrates a lack of good sense when harsh words are said in anger. The angry person puts himself at risk for no good reason. (המאירי)
- (3) When a man of discernment is the object of contempt , he bears the insult silently and does not reply with a corresponding taunt. (אבן עזרא)
- (4) Rather than scorning another person who is trying to say something one should keep silent and listen to what he has to say. (רלב"ג, חנוך לנער)
- (5) Sometimes a person in authority has so little respect for someone under his control that he talks openly in his presence about things that the lesser person should not hear. It would be better if he remained silent until the lesser person left the room. (חנוך לנער)
- (6) An example of unwisely holding another person in contempt was the behavior of the base men who scorned Shaul HaMelech after the prophet Shmuel anointed him as king (*Shmuel I 10:27*). Interestingly, Shaul kept silent but for him this was the wrong thing to do, as in doing so he failed to uphold the dignity of the monarchy. This demonstrates the importance of careful reflection. (רש"י)
- (7) Another example of foolishly scorning another person was Golias who publicly derided the young David when he confronted him in battle (*Shmuel I 17:42*). (רש"י)