

Mishlei 11-19

Charity

Key Concepts

Giving charity to the needy is certainly a great *mitzvah*, so great that its reward is described as the blessing of life. However, the manner in which charity is given can be more important than the act itself. If not done in the right way, charity can be distorted to serve selfish and deceitful ends, thereby corrupting its nobility and sanctity.

A person who gives charity must be careful about its potential pitfalls which are related to the fact that people admire the giver of charity and tend to honor him. This is because, depending on the size of the donation, giving charity can imply wealth on the part of the giver as well generosity. Since people tend to honor a wealthy man, the giver can be tempted to adjust the amount and method of giving in such a way as to maximize the honor rather than to maximize the benefit to those who need it. Such temptation may be abetted when the giver is honored in proportion to the size of his donation.

Thus, the giver must learn to resist this effect and focus his efforts on the real purpose of charity. He should direct his philanthropy to those who need it most. And he should do his utmost to give his charity in private, without fanfare.

Exploring Mishlei

(יט) כִּרְצֹדֶקָה לְחַיִּים וּמְרֹדֶף רָעָה לְמוֹתוֹ:

***(19) Giving true charity leads to life,
but for the pursuer of evil it leads to his death.***

Here Mishlei shows how the giving of charity can lead to two totally opposite results: life and death.

If it is true charity, being sincerely given for the benefit of the needy, it leads the giver on the path to life. However, if the giver has allowed his charitable act to be corrupted, so that he uses it as a device merely to gain honor or to gain people's trust in order to take advantage of them, then the pursuit of his selfish goals will lead him to death.

Another proverb in which Mishlei addresses the subject of charity is in Segment 10-02, where he teaches the importance of finding a proper balance between charitable giving and the material possessions which a person must acquire to support his family.

Mishlei also touches on the relationship between charity and life in Segment 11-04 where he points out that the money people spend may be a better protection than the money they save. In fact, the money given as charity will save them from death.

Learning Mishlei

Giving true charity — **בְּצֶדֶקָה**

leads to life — **לְחַיִּים**

but for the pursuer of evil, — **וּמְרִדֵי רָעָה**

who uses charity to deceive people about his intentions,
that very charity will lead to his death — **לְמוֹתוֹ**.

Additional Insights

(1) The word **בְּ** is used in this verse to imply truth and certitude as in Bamidbar 27:7 -- **בְּ** בְּנוֹת צְלֻפְחָד דִּבְרַת (רש"י, רבינו יונה, המאירי, רלב"ג, מצודות).

(2) The word *tzedakah* in the context of this verse as well as the previous one is not necessarily limited to charity, but may also be include all types of righteous behavior (i.e. good *middos*). Hashem has given us life to enable us to perform a mission. However, if we fail to abide by His intentions but use our energies for evil, we should expect the gift of life to be taken from us. (המאירי, רשר"ה, מלבי"ם)

(3) Other commentators interpret *tzedakah* in this verse specifically as charity. In that sense it refers to charity that is given with sincere intentions. (אבן יחיאל, מצודות, אלשיך)