

Mishlei 11-17

Futility

Key Concepts

When a person is engaged in a demanding activity, he hopes it will be worthwhile and lead to some beneficial result. This will be the case if the activity has a spiritual motive, such as serving Hashem or helping other people. But the activity of a wicked person (*rasha*) is motivated by his selfish interest. Such activity is inherently futile and all the effort that he puts into it is wasted.

Exploring Mishlei

(יח) רָשָׁע עֹשֶׂה פְּעֻלַּת־שָׁקֶר וְזֵרַע צְדָקָה שְׂכָר אֱמֶת:

(18) *The rasha performs an act of falsehood [because it has no permanence], but sowing righteousness earns a true reward.*

Mishlei describes the futile activity of the *rasha* as being false since his reasons for doing the work are only illusory. Even though his work seems to show early promise, in the end the *rasha* will be disappointed.

This is contrasted with activity that is spiritually motivated. Such activity is described in terms of sowing, because it is comparable to the act of planting a field. Scattering tiny seeds does not seem intuitively useful, but it can yield bountiful crops. Similarly, the reward for righteous activity is characterized as being true for the person who engages in it will reap a reward that is eternal.

Learning Mishlei

(יח) רָשָׁע עֹשֶׂה פְּעֻלַּת שָׁקֶר
וְזֵרַע צְדָקָה שְׂכָר אֱמֶת:

The activity of a *rasha* does not lead to a lasting result. Although he appears to be busy, the *rasha* is actually **performing an act of falsehood** — רָשָׁע עֹשֶׂה פְּעֻלַּת־שָׁקֶר. But the activity of the *tzaddik* is an act of **sowing righteousness** — וְזֵרַע צְדָקָה, which has the durability of its spiritual truth. It therefore **earns a true reward** — שְׂכָר אֱמֶת, that is, a reward which endures.

Additional Insights

A series of insights illuminating this proverb are presented below. The numbers identifying the insights refer to the listing of sources at the end of the segment.

FALSE ACTIVITY

- (1) The activity of a *rasha* is inherently false because he is performing it with the expectation of success, and the end result is that it will ultimately fail.
- (2) The *rasha* who devotes himself to building up financial wealth is wasting his energies because his wealth will not endure. A stranger will get the benefit of the work he has done.
- (3) The *rasha* thinks he is getting his reward through the pleasure he gets in this world, but it is a false reward since he is exchanging transient pleasure for the retribution he will have to face in the next world.

SOWING RIGHTEOUSNESS

- (4) Righteous activity has validity because the person will surely receive his reward, if not in this world, then in the World to Come.
- (5) Righteous activity is like planting a field. The seeds appear to rot in the ground and the fruits are not necessarily visible initially. It is only after the passage of time that the crops are seen to grow.
- (6) Righteous activity such as learning Torah and developing one's character will yield success that is evident in acquired knowledge and *middos* (refined behavioral traits).
- (7) The *rasha* has engaged in accumulating material goods, an activity which seems productive. However, he has accomplished nothing, for his work is futile unless it serves a spiritual end. In contrast, the act of sowing righteousness is certain to lead to true life, both physical and spiritual. This is a true accomplishment that will endure for all time.

Sources

The primary sources used for the additional insights illuminating this segment are listed below.

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| (3) - הגר"א | (1) - רש"י, רבינו יונה |
| (4) - רש"י, רבינו יונה | (2) - אבן יחייא |

(7) - מלבי"ם

(5) - רבינו יונה, הגר"א

(6) - רלב"ג, חנוך לנער

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