

Mishlei 11-21

Ornamentation

Key Concepts

An appropriate ornament can enhance our appreciation of a worthy person, calling attention to his or her good qualities. However, even a beautiful and valuable ornament can be ugly and false if the person does not reflect the good qualities that the ornament implies. The lesson here is that an ornament has little true value in itself. Its value lies in the message that it sends about the person. If that is a false message the ornament does more harm than good.

Here Mishlei presents two examples of ornaments that demonstrate the above principle. However, they are only examples and the basic concept can apply in various situations in life.

Exploring Mishlei

(כב) נָזַם זָהָב בְּאַף חֲזִיר אִשָּׁה יָפָה וְסָרַת טָעָם:

(22) *A golden ring in the snout of a pig; [so is] a beautiful woman of bad character.*

The first example is that of a gold ring that has been foolishly attached to the snout of a pig. Despite the apparent beauty and value of the ring, onlookers will easily recognize that the undesirable characteristics of the pig, its filth and ugly habits, have not been improved. So the ornament is clearly false.

The second example is more subtle. It refers to the physical beauty of a woman, a quality which is widely appreciated and praised. And yet that beauty is false if the woman has a bad character. In such a case her beauty can bring about pain and suffering. When a person encounters such a woman, he should remind himself of the example of the golden ring.

Likewise a woman who happens to lack the more obvious features of physical beauty should remind herself that these are only superficial ornaments. True beauty is within. Everyone who knows her will see her inner beauty shining forth upon her face.

Another example which Mishlei leaves to our imagination is that of a scholarly person (*talmid chacham*) whose behavior is inconsistent with the Torah knowledge that he has acquired. In such a case, the Torah knowledge is a false ornament

which can trick people into thinking of him as a worthwhile influence on their lives. Unfortunately, he may be using that impression to take criminal advantage of the unwary.

Learning Mishlei

(כב) נִיָּס זָהָב בְּאַף חֲזִיר
אִשָּׁה יָפָה וְסָרְתָּ טַעַם:

A golden ring in the snout of a pig – נִיָּס זָהָב בְּאַף חֲזִיר does not make the pig more attractive. **Likewise a beautiful woman of bad character** – אִשָּׁה יָפָה וְסָרְתָּ טַעַם is not enhanced by her beauty.

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.

THE GOLDEN RING

- (1) The pig will instinctively soil its golden ring in filth. The ring's beauty will therefore not enhance the pig's appearance. On the contrary, it even becomes repulsive in the context of the ugliness and filth of its wearer.
- (2) A true ornament is carefully guarded. As the pig wallows in filth it demonstrates that its ornament has no value to it.

A WOMAN'S BEAUTY

- (3) The appearance of a person reflects what is in his heart. That is where true beauty lies.
- (4) Just as the golden ring will not remain spared from dirt, a woman's beauty will be dragged in the filth of immorality if she is foolish.

TORAH

- (5) A *talmid chacham* who stops learning has defiled his ornament of Torah. He demeans the Torah just as a pig demeans a golden ring.
- (6) Torah will not enhance a *talmid chacham* who allows his *middos* (character) to be corrupted. Instead of using his wisdom for Torah study, he utilizes it for sordid aims, such as to cheat and steal.
- (7) An analogy can be made between Torah and beauty. The Gemara says

that if one occupies himself with the Torah for its own sake his learning becomes an elixir of life to him. But if he occupies himself with the Torah not for its own sake, it becomes to him a deadly poison. Both Torah and physical beauty have the potential of promoting a tragic outcome if misused.

Sources

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

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|--------------------|----------------------------|
| (1) - רש"י, מלבי"ם | (5) - רש"י, שבט מיהודה |
| (2) - מצודות | (6) - המאירי, מצודות |
| (3) - הגר"א | (7) - שבט מיהודה, תענית ז. |
| (4) - רשר"ה | |

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