

Mishlei 12-04

Matrimony

Key Concepts

The unique relationship between husband and wife is symbolized by the creation of the first man and woman from one human body. Because of the closeness of this relationship, each marriage partner tends to identify with the other and see that person as an extension of his or herself. As a result, a husband tends to have high expectations of his wife's character and she of his character.

The phenomenon of high expectations encourages a man to make an ongoing effort to improve his character in order to meet his wife's expectations. The same is true for her.

The way a spouse responds to the other's expectations can bring great joy and mutual happiness but can also result in ill will and strife. This proverb explores the range of a wife's response to her husband's expectations, beginning with a wife who delights her husband by exceeding his expectations and ending with a wife who disappoints her husband.

Exploring Mishlei

(ד) אִשֶׁת־חַיִל עֶטְרַת בַּעֲלָהּ, וְכֹרֶקֶב בְּעַצְמוֹתָיו מִבִּישָׁה :

**(4) A woman of character is her husband's crown,
but a shameful wife is like rot in his bones.**

Mishlei uses vivid metaphors to illustrate the intensity of emotions that marital expectations can arouse. These metaphors build on the overlapping sense of identity between husband and wife. The woman whose character exceeds her husband's expectations is visualized as a glorious crown for his head.

At the other extreme, the disappointment of unmet expectations is perceived as a rot in his very bones. The extremes in the husband's response to his wife's expectations can be assumed to be the mirror image of those covered here.

Learning Mishlei

(4) A woman of character – אִשֶׁת־חַיִל
is the crown, – עֶטְרַת
of her husband – בַּעֲלָהּ

but like rot – וְכַרְקָב
 in his bones – בְּעַצְמוֹתָיו
 is a shameful wife – מְבִישָׁה.

Additional Insights

THE WOMAN OF CHARACTER

(1) A woman of character has the intelligence and patience that are needed to balance the conflicting physical and spiritual needs of her family, as described in Segment 31-02. (אבן יחיאל, רבינו יונה)

(2) A woman of character is a woman with high intelligence who fears Hashem. She is the opposite of the shameful wife. (הגר"א)

(3) Just as the crown symbolizes the perfection of the head that wears it, a woman of character makes her husband fulfilled and complete. (אבן יחיאל)

(4) A crown is an article of clothing and therefore external to the body, but is placed on the head as a sign of honor. Similarly, a woman of character builds up the external public stature and honor of her husband. But this is in addition to her internal support of his very bones. (מלבי"ם, רבינו יונה, חנוך לנער)

THE SHAMEFUL WIFE

(5) A shameful wife is like an illness of the bones for which there is no cure because they share the same home and constantly affect each other. She is like a part of him, as it says, "bone of my bones" (Bereishis 2:23). (רבינו יונה, הגר"א)

(6) A shameful wife detracts from her husband's dignity and sense of worth. It is like a part of him has rotted away and the rot in her part of their unified self affects his part as well. (מלבי"ם)

(7) A shameful wife (מְבִישָׁה) is comparable to a shameful son (בֶּן מְבִישׁ). Just as the shameful son disappoints the hopes of his parents, the shameful wife disappoints the expectations of her husband. (See Segment 10-05). (רבינו יונה, דעת סופרים)