

Mishlei 12-08

Intellect and Heart

Key Concepts

Mishlei has been emphasizing that the duty of every person is to acquire wisdom (*chochmah*). He needs to use that wisdom to direct his actions in a way that pleases his Creator.

There are two related instruments of the mind that enable a person to acquire wisdom. These are the power of the intellect (*sechel*) and the power of insight (*binah*). The intellect enables the person to judge the truth of an idea or fact, distinguishing it from falsehood. Insight enables a person to visualize an idea in his mind and relate one idea to another. Both intellect and insight are essential, but ultimately intellect takes precedence because it is the use of intellect that directly enables a person to adhere to the truth of the Torah.

The intellect is able to perform its function of distinguishing truth from falsehood only if it has not been contaminated by the effects of the evil inclination (*yetzer hara*). The *yetzer hara* works upon the heart, which is the moral, ethical and emotional inner being of the person, his expression of will. If the person has trained his heart to resist the *yetzer hara*, his intellect will remain pure, but if his heart becomes corrupted by the *yetzer hara*, the intellect will become contaminated as well, which will result in the person adopting false ideas and defending those false beliefs with the vigor that the heart generates. Such a person is worthy of disdain, no matter how powerful his intellect may happen to be.

A person's intellectual powers are granted at birth but can be developed and enhanced by good mental habits just as his body can be strengthened through healthy eating and exercise.

Exploring Mishlei

(ח) לְפִי־שִׁכְלוֹ יִהְיֶה־אִישׁ וְנִעְוָה־לֵב יִהְיֶה לְבוֹז׃

(8) A man may be praised according to the power of his intellect, but the man of corrupted heart is to be scorned.

This proverb contrasts the praise that may be earned by having a pure intellect with the scorn that a person deserves if his heart has become corrupted by the *yetzer hara*, resulting in the contamination of his intellect.

Learning Mishlei

Depending on the power of his intellect — לְפִי שְׂכָלוֹ,
A man may be praised to a greater or lesser extent — יְהַלְלֵאִישׁ.

But this is only as long as his intellect is pure
 and has not been tainted by his *yetzer hara*.

But the man of corrupted heart — וְנַעֲוֵה לֵב —
is to be scorned — יְהִי לְבוֹז —

for his lack of integrity will corrupt his intellect
 and he will eventually be found out.

Additional Insights

- (1) A person whose heart has been turned away from the Torah deserves scorn despite the power of his intellect. (רש"י, מצודות)
- (2) The intellect refers to the ability of the mind that goes beyond insight, such as to grasp the truth. (מלבי"ם)
- (3) Although the intellect is normally treated as a good thing in holy writings, it can be misled by the heart, which is the ultimate ruling force in the soul of a person. (מלבי"ם)
- (4) There is difference between a perverse heart (*ikesh lev*) as in Segment 11-12 and a corrupted heart (*na'aveh lev*) as in this proverb. Both have been led astray by the *yetzer hara*, but the perverse heart is affected by misdirected sensuality and the corrupted heart is affected by erroneous logic. (מלבי"ם)
- (5) A person with a corrupted heart will be drawn to deny the truth. He will stubbornly insist on the opposite of truth and therefore should be disdained. (רבינו יונה, רלב"ג)
- (6) A person should favor the intellect over the physical body, because it is the intellect that deserves praise. (אבן יחיאל)
- (7) The person of corrupted heart will eventually be found out even though he conceals his thinking. (הגר"א)
- (8) The greater the intellect of a corrupt man the more he should be put to shame for not using his intellect for constructive purposes. (אלשיך)