

Mishlei 12-09

Dignity and Toil

Key Concepts

It is natural to want to work in an occupation which allows you a sense of dignity and self-esteem. Such an environment can motivate you to live up to the noble image you have of yourself as a child of Hashem. This is a good thing if you can avoid the negative side-effects of false pride and haughtiness.

However, circumstances do not always permit you to choose the perfect work environment. In such cases you will need to balance your priorities, recognizing that the benefits of self-esteem are only a means to an end and not your ultimate purpose. If the requirements of your job or occupation demand that you submit to work conditions that you consider somewhat degrading, you should learn to make the best of your situation. Despite the fact that you must compromise your dignity, that choice is still better than the alternative, which is to go hungry or allow those who are dependent upon you to go hungry.

Some people find any kind of hard work degrading. They would like everything to be done for them by others. Mishlei does not encourage such an attitude. On the contrary hard work is ennobling and the reward is far greater than the financial compensation. This is especially true when it is the toil of immersing yourself in the challenges of learning Torah. The rewards of acquiring the wisdom and the delights of Torah knowledge are granted only to those who see themselves as "slaves" to the hard work of learning.

Exploring Mishlei

(ט) טוֹב נִקְלָה וְעָבַד לוֹ מִמֵּתְכַבֵּד וְחָסַר לֶחֶם :

(9) It is better to be undignified and do one's own work than to maintain self-esteem at the cost of going hungry.

This proverb contrasts the limited choices a person may have to choose from: (1) undignified work or (2) going hungry. Undignified work is still the better option.

Learning Mishlei

It is **better** for a person **to be undignified** — טוב נְקָלָה
and be his own servant — וְעֶבֶד לוֹ
than to maintain his self-esteem — מִמִּתְכַבֵּד
but lack bread — וְחָסַר לֶחֶם

because there is no one who is available to do the work for him.

Additional Insights

- (1) If you are concerned with a loss of dignity, remember that there is no loss of dignity as great as being dependent on others. (אלשיך)
- (2) If you feel your dignity requires that you have an easy life and you fail to apply yourself to the learning of Torah you will suffer a lack of the bread of Torah. (מלבי"ם)
- (3) Although pride is repugnant to Hashem, dignity is acceptable and is considered desirable. The principle of modesty (avoiding provocative behavior) requires that a person avoid a condition of degradation and wretchedness. (רבינו יונה)
- (4) When learning Torah, it is preferable to endure the shame of exposing one's ignorance by asking questions rather than pretend to understand. (הגר"א)