

Mishlei 12-10

Compassion and Cruelty

Key Concepts

The Torah teaches us to emulate our Creator and show compassion to those less fortunate or less capable than we. Our compassion must extend to the poor who are dependent upon us, to all the members of our household, and even to the animals in our care. In order to be able to show compassion the *tzadik* (righteous person) must know the needs of those who are dependent upon him. He must even have an idea of what kinds of emotions they are experiencing so that he can be sure to treat them with kindness and consideration.

A failure to act with compassion is the mark of a *rasha* (wicked person). The *rasha* is insensitive to the needs of others and so in place of compassion his actions reflect the cruelty in his nature. Even when he seems to be acting with compassion, his motivation is self-interest. The appearance of compassion is only a cover, which he hopes to use for his own advantage.

Exploring Mishlei

(י) יודע צדיק נפש בהמתו ורחמי רשעים אכזרי:

*The tzadik knows the needs of his animal,
but the compassion of the resha'im is cruelty.*

This proverb points to the essential quality of the compassionate person. He is sensitive to the needs of all who are dependent upon his goodwill, a category which even includes dumb beasts. The compassionate person is identified as a *tzadik* and is contrasted with the *resha'im* who are insensitive to the emotional and material circumstances of others. If poor people are hungry, the *rasha* might say, "Let them eat cake!" This is a reflection of his innate cruelty.

Learning Mishlei

(10) The *tzadik* knows — יודע צדיק
the needs of his animal — נפש בהמתו
but the compassion of the *resha'im* — ורחמי רשעים
is cruelty — אכזרי

Additional Insights

(1) The Talmud teaches that a person may not eat until he feeds his animal, for it says (*Devarim* 11:15), "I will give grass in the fields for your cattle and you will eat and be satisfied." (ברכות מ' ע"א, רבינו יונה, מלבי"ם)

(2) Because the *tzadik* is compassionate, he is aware of the needs of his entire household, including the lowliest beast. (רש"י)

(3) In contrast, even when the *resha'im* appear to act compassionately, they are often doing it to make an impression and so the feeling in their heart is one of cruelty rather than compassion. (מצודות)

(4) A person whose behavior is guided by the Torah will always be mindful of those who depend upon him. By contrast, when someone's pity is not rooted in the Torah but derives from his own inclination, he can just as easily become cruel as compassionate, depending upon his mood. (רש"י)

(5) The *tzadik* knows the needs of his animal in terms of when to feed it, what to feed it, and how much to feed it. He also knows not to exceed a suitable workload. And if he doesn't know, he makes sure to find out. (מלבי"ם)

(6) The *rasha* may pretend to take pity on a man under his control, but his intent is to force him into servitude. He may add to the feed he gives his animal, but only because he wants to make it work harder for him. (הגר"א)

(7) The *rasha* may feed a poor man but without offering him a comforting smile. (רבינו יונה)