

Mishlei 12-11

Idleness and Toil

Key Concepts

People who work hard all their lives often see their goal as being able to idle away their final years. They see the ideal state of a person as passivity because it is undemanding. This is a perverted attitude because fulfillment is granted to man through toil. Man was put in this world to overcome challenges. He gains true gratification only through being active.

Through hard work the farmer is able to grow the food that he needs to feed himself and his family. If his hard work is applied to Torah learning, he will be rewarded with knowledge and will be able to teach others. But if he is enticed by the example of idlers who wile away their time with unproductive pastimes, he will live an unfulfilled life. Such a person shows himself to lack the self-discipline that enables him to do what his Creator expects of him.

Exploring Mishlei

(יא) עֵבֶד אֲדָמְתוֹ יִשְׁבַּע לֶחֶם וּמְרִידֵי רֵיקִים חֲסֵרֵי לֵב:

One who works his soil will have his fill of bread, but he who follows idlers lacks a self-disciplining heart

This proverb uses the example of the farmer to demonstrate the importance and value of hard work. The farmer is literally fulfilling the direction of his Creator: “By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread” (Bereishis 3:19). He is contrasted with the individual who chooses an unworthy different model, the idlers who spend their time in empty-headed passivity. Such people exhibit a lack of self-discipline which is described as having a *chasar lev* (deficient heart). See also Segments 10-13 and 11-11.

Learning Mishlei

(11) One who works his soil — עֵבֶד אֲדָמְתוֹ
will have his fill of bread — יִשְׁבַּע לֶחֶם,
but one who follows idlers — וּמְרִידֵי רֵיקִים
lacks a self-disciplining heart — חֲסֵרֵי לֵב
and will suffer the consequences.

Additional Insights

(1) The hard-working farmer of this proverb may also be understood as an allegory for one who learns Torah and keeps going over what he has learned. This takes self-discipline because although he is rewarded by deeper insight this is not necessarily evident until later. (רש"י)

(2) The hard-working farmer of this proverb may also be understood as an allegory for one who develops himself. He himself is the soil that needs to be improved. His perfected Torah knowledge and good *middos* are his reward. (הגר"א)

(3) One who pursues unproductive activities may be said to lack sense (חֶסֶד-רֵלֶב). Good sense would tell him that he won't have the rewards of hard work. (מצודות)

(4) One who refrains from hard work and instead spends his time in the company of idlers will be deficient. Besides lacking in bread, he will end up be lacking in the virtues of a good heart, that is, he will develop bad *middos*. (רבינו יונה, רלב"ג)