

Mishlei 12-18

Destructive Speech

Key Concepts

People use their power of speech so commonly that it is almost like breathing. Just as there are no restraints on breathing, a person may be under the impression that there should be no restraints on his ability to say what he wants, when he wants to say it. That's why Mishlei makes a special point about reminding us that talk can be a dangerous weapon and can cause great harm. He compares even ordinary talk to a sword which can potentially be used impale a victim.

Mishlei advocates the course of the wise person who is careful about what he says and to whom he says it. Under certain circumstances the wise person can even mitigate the harm that was done by another's careless talk. Thusm, the wise man can prevent the strife and ill will that harmful talk might bring about.

Exploring Mishlei

(יח) יֵשׁ בֹּטָה כְּמִדְקָרוֹת חֶרֶב וְלִשׁוֹן חֲכָמִים מְרַפָּא:

Some talk is like the piercings of a sword but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

The proverb portrays talk as a weapon which, depending on the circumstances can have the catastrophic effect of a sword wielded by a skilled fighter. Contrasted to the destructive sword is the tongue of a wise man. Instead of using his tongue as a sword, he uses it to do good.

We have seen an example of the destructive power of the tongue in the incident of the town of Nov which was destroyed under orders of King Shaul, thinking that it was a hotbed of treason against him and his kingdom. He did this only after he had been incited into uncontrollable rage by a slanderous report given to him by Doeg the Edomi. See Mizmor 052 (Tragic Talk).

Learning Mishlei

יֵשׁ בּוֹטָה כְּמַדְקָרוֹת חֶרֶב
וּלְשׁוֹן חֲכָמִים מְרַפֵּא:

Some talk is destructive **like** the **piercings of a sword** – **יֵשׁ בּוֹטָה כְּמַדְקָרוֹת חֶרֶב**, **but the tongue of the wise** brings **healing** – **וּלְשׁוֹן חֲכָמִים מְרַפֵּא**.

Additional Insights

A series of insights illuminating this proverb are presented below. The numbers identifying the insights refer to the listing of sources at the end of the segment.

- (1) Speech can be harmful if it provokes the listener into destructive action.
- (2) Through the techniques of personal insult and sarcasm a person can cause severe emotional hurt that goes right to the heart. If the victim is embarrassed or shamed in the presence of other people, the effect upon him is considered equivalent to spilling his blood.
- (3) The destructive power of speech can be compared to multiple piercings of a sword because *lashon hara* (gossip) harms three people: the speaker, the listener, and the subject of the gossip.
- (4) Gossip and slander can cause serious harm to another person's reputation and to his ability to function. By revealing details about his private affairs the victim can be put in a painfully awkward situation that can cause him financial harm.
- (5) The worst type of harm that a person can do is to testify falsely against him to the authorities, resulting in damage to his person or his property.
- (6) The tongue of the wise brings healing because a gentle word can disable an arm that is about to strike in anger.
- (7) The tongue of the wise encourages people to do *teshuvah*, which will bring healing of the sins of harmful speech.
- (8) The tongue of the wise brings to bear the power of Torah. He admonishes the one who is guilty of *lashon hara* and undercuts his credibility, thereby mitigating the damage that was done.
- (9) The tongue of the wise can soften the effect of *lashon hara* by interpreting what was said in a positive way so that strife is averted.

Sources

The primary sources used for the additional insights illuminating this segment are listed below.

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| (6) - רשר"ה | (1) - רש"י |
| (7) - מצודות | (2) - רבינו יונה |
| (8) - רבינו יונה | (3) - אלשיך |
| (9) - חנוך לנער | (4) - רבינו יונה, חנוך לנער |
| | (5) - חנוך לנער |