

Mishlei 13-03

Vigilance in Speech

Key Concepts

Human speech is a marvelous gift from Hashem. However, because it is so accessible, people don't realize its power and are often careless in how they use it. They forget that while speech can accomplish great things it can also bring about frightening destruction.

Mishlei teaches that every person must be constantly vigilant and watchful in how he uses his power. Every time he speaks, he should consider the potential consequences of the words he utters. He must always remember that speech is an instrument of the mind and so the mind must be in conscious control at all times.

Previously (Segment 10-19) Mishlei taught that excessive talk is inherently a source of risk. Now he distinguishes between kinds of speech and stresses the importance of vigilance to properly manage each kind.

Exploring Mishlei

(ג) נִצָּר פִּי שֹׁמֵר נֶפְשׁוֹ פִּי שֶׁקֶשׁ שְׂפָתָיו מִחֲתָה-לוֹ:

(3) He who guards his mouth protects his soul,

but he who continually opens wide his lips, that is his calamity.

Through constant vigilance in guarding the instruments of speech, a person can avoid the tragedy of destructive speech and thereby protect his own soul and his life from calamity.

The proverb refers to two instruments of speech: the mouth and the lips. Here the lips symbolize the kind of thoughtless, superficial talk which seems to happen by itself. Lips that are opened wide in continuous talk are inherently dangerous. In contrast, the mouth symbolizes talk which expresses carefully considered thoughts. These can also be very dangerous if the person does not give them the full attention they deserve. Every person needs to pay attention to these two extremes of speech.

Vigilance is needed to guard the speech of the mouth and thoughtfully weigh its consequences. At the other extreme, speech of the lips must be strictly reined in so that it does not run away with itself.

Learning Mishlei

He who guards his mouth – נֹצֵר פִּיּוֹ

with continuing vigilance from the temptation to speak *lashon hara*
protects his soul – שֹׁמֵר נַפְשׁוֹ.

but he who opens wide his lips – פֹּעֵק שְׂפָתָיו,

and continually says whatever comes to mind,
that is his calamity – מְחַתֵּה לוֹ.

Additional Insights

Wisdom in Words

- (1) The word נֹצֵר (guards) implies continuing, intensive vigilance. This is as opposed to שֹׁמֵר (protects), which is a more general term. (רש"י, מלבי"ם)
- (2). The word נַפְשׁוֹ (soul) could refer to the physical self (that is, life) or the spiritual soul. Both are at risk if the person does not guard his mouth. (המאירי)
- (3) The word פֹּעֵק (opens) implies opening wide in a crude fashion. It also suggests being continually open. (רש"י, אבן עזרא)
- (4) The word שְׂפָתָיו (lips) implies the instruments of external, superficial speech. In contrast the word פִּיּוֹ (mouth) refers to the instrument of thoughtful expression. Mishlei urges restraint and self-control, not only in superficial talk, but even in thoughtful reflection. (מלבי"ם)
- (5). The word מְחַתֵּה (calamity) is derived from a root meaning fear. The person whose lips are given free rein to say whatever his whims suggest is like an enemy to be feared. (רבינו יונה)

Other Insights

- (6) People think that if they have not spoken against another person, either directly or indirectly, that person should be grateful. But they don't realize that they themselves will be harmed by any verbal barbs they have aimed at another person for they will be subject to judgment in the World to Come. The other person will be unaffected. (אלשיך)

(7) A person who “guards his mouth” does not open it without the consent of his conscious mind. (רבינו יונה)

(8). A person may have a good soul, and many *mitzvos* to his credit, if he does not control his speech he will be subject to calamity. (הגר"א)

(9). A person who accepts criticism quietly without answering back and without insulting the one who admonished him will be protecting his soul from punishment in the next world. But if he opens his lips to embarrass the the one who admonished him, he will face the calamity of his own punishment as well as what would have been meted out to that other person. (שבט מיהודה)