

Mishlei 13-14

Vitality

Key Concepts

Many people think of the Torah as an integrated collection of laws and principles of behavior. That is saying a lot, but it is only part of the truth. When the Torah is drawn into the soul of an individual, it becomes a living force that is constantly being renewed by Hashem to enable that individual to meet the challenges of life and to enable him to respond to its changing conditions.

The *chacham* (wise man) who has faithfully absorbed the wisdom of the Torah becomes a different person. He is imbued with a spiritual and intellectual vitality that may be compared to a bubbling spring. That vitality helps him identify and recognize the truth in every confusing circumstance so that he is not misled by sin when it is camouflaged by changing forms.

The human quality that tempts man to give in to sinful behavior is the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination). A characteristic of the *yetzer hara* is that it changes the appearance of sinful temptations so that they seem innocent and safe. The Torah gives the *chacham* the vitality to enable him to respond to the traps being set by the *yetzer hara* and distinguish that which is real from that which is illusion.

Exploring Mishlei

(יד) תּוֹרַת חָכָם מְקוֹר חַיִּים לְסוּר מִמִּקְשֵׁי מוֹת:

(14) *The Torah of the chacham is a wellspring of life,
that teaches him how to avoid the snares of death.*

This proverb identifies the *chacham* with the Torah that he has learned over the years. Together they became a unified force with the vitality of a living spring. That force has the power to guide the *chacham* and enable him to guide other people so that they can avoid the traps set by the *yetzer hara*. These traps are sins which appear to be ordinary aspects of life, but are really forms of death, an inevitable consequence that can gradually swallow up a person's whole being.

Learning Mishlei

(14) The Torah of the *chacham* — תּוֹרַת חָכָם
 is a constantly bubbling and flowing,
wellspring of life — מְקוֹר חַיִּים
 that teaches how to **avoid** — לְסוּר
 the temptations of sin, which are
the snares of death — מְמַקְשֵׁי מוֹת.

Additional Insights

Wisdom in Words

(1) The word מְקוֹר may be translated as “source” or as “wellspring.” In either case it is identified with the flow of wisdom which emanates from the mouth of the *tzadik* and represents life to those who listen to it, as we have seen in Segment 10-11 (Speech). (מלבי"ם)

(2) Because the flow from a bubbling spring is constant and the water is available at all times it is used to represent Torah wisdom that conveys the vitality of life itself because it is available to deal with a situation or circumstance that may arise at any time. (רבינו יונה)

(3) The word “Torah” may be used to refer to any teaching or instruction of Torah wisdom as we have seen in Segment 04-01 (Wisdom and Tradition). It may also be referring to the Torah that Hashem gave us at Sinai, representing the entire body of law and wisdom that is the foundation of the existence of the world and the Jewish nation. (המאירי)

(4) Torah is here referred to as the “source” of life. Elsewhere in Mishlei it is referred to as the “Tree of Life” (Segment 11-30). Just as the tree produces life-giving fruit so it is that the *tzadik*, through his actions and demeanor, inspires others to be elevated spiritually. However, Mishlei is saying that when the Torah is viewed as a “source” of life, the words of the *chacham* penetrate directly into the souls of his listeners, making them wiser and more noble. (רשר"ה)

(5) A *chacham* is someone who has learned from his predecessors and made their wisdom his own. He then gives his personal flavor to the wisdom, and makes it appropriate for his generation. (דעת סופרים)

Other Insights

(6) A snare or trap is a hidden danger. It is dangerous because it is invisible to the unwary passerby. The guidance of the *chacham* is necessary to help his listeners see the dangers that they might easily become victim to. (דעת סופרים)

(7) Imagine a person traveling a dangerous road and carrying a valuable treasure. He is in constant fear of losing his treasure. This is what the teaching of the *chacham* achieves. It alerts the passengers of life to the value of their treasure and the great risks they are facing. They can easily lose the Torah which is their source of life. (הר יראה (מוסר אביד))