

Mishlei 13-18

Willful Stubbornness

Key Concepts

The purpose of Mishlei is to offer guidance in perfecting moral character and acquiring wisdom. This is a process which involves changes in a person's thinking and behavior. Since change is difficult for most people, Hashem intervenes by exposing them to various kinds of moral discipline (*mussar*) and admonition (*tochachah*).

Such lessons may be in the form of an experience of pain or discomfort. They may also involve witnessing an unusual event or being exposed to an enlightening teaching. (See Segment 10-17)

Externally provided help of this kind will be effective only if the individual is responsive to guidance. But if he is stubborn and willful, he may reject the lessons which are there for him to see. He will then be at risk of going through life lacking both good character and wisdom.

That is tragic because he will not have the benefits that these virtues bring. In fact he may ultimately be reduced to poverty and shame because he is not focusing his energies on doing what is best for him in this world and the next.

Exploring Mishlei

(יח) רִישׁ וְקֶלוֹן פּוֹרֵעַ מוֹסֵר וְשׂוֹמֵר תּוֹכַחַת יִכָּבֵד :

(18) *Poverty and shame come to him who rejects mussar*

but the one who responds to admonition will be honored.

We have seen in Segment 10-17 (Intervention and Life) that *mussar* is related to the idea of the correction of past errors. It emphasizes a person's *middos* (moral character) and suggests the deterrent effect of punishment either through actual suffering or through self-analysis. In contrast, *tochachah* refers to a gentle admonition or reproof, resulting in a motivation to goodness and spiritual growth in the future.

In our proverb the negative consequences of rejecting even the most powerful lessons of *mussar* are contrasted with the favorable consequences of responding to even the mildest admonition. The benefits of character improvement are witnessed in the positive attitude that people have to a person with good character. They are inclined to trust him and respect him.

Learning Mishlei

(18) **Poverty and shame** — רִישׁ וְקִלּוֹן
 will come to the stubborn person **who rejects**, — פּוֹרֵעַ
moral discipline (*mussar*) — רִישׁ וְקִלּוֹן פּוֹרֵעַ יִפְלֵ בְרָע
but the one who responds, — וְשׂוֹמֵר
to admonition — תּוֹכַחַת
will be honored by people — יִכְבֵּד

Additional Insights

- (1) Mishlei teaches that poverty is brought about through deceitfulness (Segment 10-04), which is one of the serious character flaws that *mussar* teaches a person to overcome. (רבינו יונה)
- (2) Wisdom is enhanced through being receptive to guidance. Mishlei teaches that the wise will inherit honor (Segment 03-31, v.35). (רלב"ג)
- (3) It takes strength of character to accept criticism gracefully and willingly. A person who does so is respected by everyone who knows him. (מצודות)
- (4) A person who rejects criticism will remain with blatant character flaws. This will lead people to scorn him. (חנוך לנער)
- (5) A scoffer is the kind of person who rejects wisdom and *mussar*. (See segment 9:02, "Don't rebuke the scoffer" v. 9:8) For such a person more painful methods are needed to make him see the light. These include poverty and shame. (שבט מיהודה)