

## Mishlei 13-19

# Physical Desire

### Key Concepts

Since sinful behavior and sinful thoughts may be driven by unrestrained physical desire, it is important for a person to be able maintain control over such desire at all times. A wise person feels a sense of gratification when he has succeeded in overcoming desire. He is relieved at having avoided temptation.

However, a fool cherishes desire because of the temporary pleasure that it gives him. Therefore, he hates the idea of suppressing desire because he does not want to forego the gratification he thinks it will bring him.

Physical desire is a powerful force which is associated with the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination). Despite its negative aspects, this force is necessary for human existence and is present in each person from the day of his birth. This means that when we speak of the human soul, we need to recognize that there is a spiritual soul and a physical soul, which is the life force. This distinction is also discussed below in the second item of Additional Insights.

The *yetzer hatov* (good inclination) is associated with intelligence and appears only after the child attains maturity. From that point on the individual should actively manage physical desire and try to restrict it to those situations in life when it serves a valid purpose. This is not easy and requires a great deal of focused effort because of the inherent sweetness of the experience of physical pleasure.

### Exploring Mishlei

(יט) תַּאֲוָה נְהִיָּה תִּעְרַב לְנַפֶּשׁ וְתוֹעֵבַת כְּסִילִים סוּר מֵרָע:

(19) *Overcoming a desire is sweet to the soul*

*but for fools it is an abomination to turn away from an evil desire.*

This proverb speaks of how a person's spiritual self is gratified through suppression of physical desire. This is contrasted with the attitude of the fool who

is disappointed when his desire is weakened. He thinks of his loss of desire as a hateful phenomenon because he forgets the pain it can cause him.

## Learning Mishlei

(19) **Overcoming a desire** — תִּאֲוָה נְהִיָּה —  
**is sweet** and gratifying **to the soul** — תִּעְרַב לְנַפְשׁ —  
 because desire tempts a person to evil behavior,  
**but for fools** it would be an **abomination** — וְתוֹעֵבַת כְּסִילִים —  
 to turn away from an evil desire — סוּר מִרָע .

## Additional Insights

### Wisdom in Words

(1) The word נְהִיָּה is a unique construction of the root “to be.” It refers to the idea of suppressing a feeling as it comes into being. Thus, as a person senses the onset of an unwelcome physical desire he may choose to suppress it by focusing his attention elsewhere. (רבינו בחיי, רלב"ג, מצודות, הגר"א, רשר"ה)

(2) The word נְהִיָּה may also refer to the idea of experience in the present, as opposed to the past. In this interpretation, it suggests the sweetness of desire as being limited to the here and now. But once the desire has been satisfied, its pleasure is gone, and the person must face the consequences. According to that interpretation, the word לְנַפְשׁ refers to the soul of physical life rather than the spiritual soul. The text then reads, “[Experiencing] desire is [temporarily] sweet to the soul.” (רש"י, רבינו יונה, המאירי, מלבי"ם)

(3) The word כְּסִיל, fool, refers to someone who has intelligence, but is not motivated by skepticism or an evil character. However, he is foolish because he allows himself to be carried away by momentary desire. (מלבי"ם)

### Other Insights

(4) The fool hates restrictions on his desire because he is carried away by the experience of physical desire and suppresses thoughts of negative consequences. (רבינו יונה, מלבי"ם)

(5) Because the soul of physical life experiences physical desire as having great sweetness, the restraint of this force is a very great challenge. (המאירי)

(6) A person who eats foods that he knows will make him sick is a fool. That is why Mishlei describes the person who gives in to his evil inclination because of physical desire as a fool. (שבט מיהודה)