

## Mishlei 13-21

# Habituation

### Key Concepts

When a person decides to follow his conscience and do the right thing, he makes it easier for himself to repeat that behavior and do another good deed. In effect he habituates himself to doing good. By the same token if he gives in to a temptation to satisfy a sinful desire in spite of what his conscience is telling him, that person is actively habituating himself to sin.

It is important to be aware that this pattern of habituation works both for good and for evil and that it is always active. Every time a person finds himself struggling with his conscience, he should consider that the decision he is now making affects not only his immediate behavior, but creates a likelihood that he will be doing something similar in the future.

Thus, after a period of repeated sinning, the process of habituation desensitizes him to the seriousness of the sin, and it is no longer a struggle. Mishlei describes the phenomenon of habituation in terms of being pursued by the evil that the person has created through his own sin. Something similar is happening when he becomes desensitized to the value of the good that he is doing. However, it is not quite the same.

He will continue to be rewarded for doing good, but the achievement is not as great because he has become habituated to doing good, and therefore it is not as though the good deeds are pursuing him. In fact, he needs to be on guard and make an effort to pursue every opportunity for a *mitzvah*, even though it is minor.

This relationship is summarized in a *Mishnah*, which states: “*Run to perform even a minor mitzvah, and run away from a sin* [because evil is pursuing you].” (*Avos* 4, 2).

## Exploring Mishlei

(כא) חֲטָאִים תִּרְדֹּף רָעָה וְאֶת צְדִיקִים יִשְׁלֵם טוֹב:

**Evil pursues sinners but the righteous will be repaid with good.**

This proverb compares the habituating effect of sin with that of *mitzvos*. In the case of sin, the evil created by sinners is pursuing them and drives them further and further into self-destruction.

In the case of *mitzvos*, the good that the righteous do will repay them by making it easier for them to continue to do good. The implication is that they should be careful not to fall into the trap of repeatedly doing the right thing without consciously seeking to continue doing better, that is, to seek opportunities for doing new *mitzvos*, no matter how minor they may seem to be.

## Learning Mishlei

(21) The **evil**—רָעָה

that they committed

**pursues sinners** — חֲטָאִים תִּרְדֹּף

for they have become habituated to sinful behavior

and will continue to sin until they are destroyed,

**but the righteous will be repaid** — וְאֶת צְדִיקִים יִשְׁלֵם

with the **good** that they have done — טוֹב

and so they will continue to do good.

## Additional Insights

(1) There is an essential imbalance between good and evil (evil pursues the sinner whereas the righteous person must pursue good). That imbalance is necessary to overcome the inherent advantage of good over evil, since the *neshamah* (soul) is inherently good and by its nature pushes a person to do good. By neutralizing this advantage, the struggle of *bechirah* (free will to choose good over evil) becomes a true test of the individual. (עלי שור: חלק שני, שער ראשון, פרק ששי)

(2) Unless the sinner does *teshuvah* (repents), the pursuit by his own evil will ultimately lead to his own self-destruction. Not only does the evil entice him into further sin, it becomes his adversary to testify against him. (רש"י, מצודות)

(3) In a sense, the punishment of the sinner is not implemented by Hashem but rather by the guilty individual himself. However, the reward for doing good is provided directly by Hashem even if the reward is not inherent in the *mitzvah*. (מלבי"ם)

(4) Not only does the process of habituation cause a person to repeat his sinful behavior, it causes him to move on to a constant worsening of his behavior. By the same token, doing *mitzvos* builds up a defensive wall to protect him from sinful temptation. (רבינו יונה)

(5) A person should not think he is safe from sin, The smallest break in his avoidance of sin can open him up to a "slippery slope" of constantly expanding sin. The evil is pursuing him and finds him "wherever he is". (רלבי"ג)

(6) The pursuit of the sinner by his evil is not limited to this world but extends into the World to Come so that he will have to give an accounting for all of his offenses. (אבן יחי"א)

(7) The current proverb expands upon the concepts of Mishlei 13-06, which teaches that doing *mitzvos* is an essential means to help a person stay on the right road through life. Without that protection he will be vulnerable to sin. (הגר"א)