

Mishlei 14-03

Conceit

Key Concepts

Every person instinctively compares himself to other people. Thus, he tends to judge his own achievements and personal qualities relative to those of others. Naturally he would like to come out ahead in as many areas as possible (wisdom, looks, skills, character, etc.).

Unfortunately, if he is a fool he will be subject to wishful thinking, which means that he will confuse the illusions he has about himself with reality. As a result he will have a higher opinion of himself than he is justified in having. This characteristic is referred to as conceit or excessive pride.

Typically, as soon as the fool opens his mouth and starts talking he gives himself away. His tongue is the instrument of his undoing, because his words express his unconscious assumptions about himself that other people are likely to recognize as foolish.

In contrast, a wise man keeps his mouth closed. His lips are sealed and thereby protect him from revealing his own opinion of himself. The wise man opens his mouth to speak only after he has carefully considered what he intends to say and concluded that it will not diminish the opinion that others have of him.

A righteous person (*tzaddik*) is constantly working on himself to restrain his conceit and to avoid thinking of himself as better than others in any way. Thus, the *tzaddik* will naturally follow the approach of wise men. The wicked person (*rasha*) is not concerned about improving his character. Thus, he is likely to reveal himself to others as a fool.

Exploring Mishlei

(ג) בְּפִי אֱוִיל חֵטֶר גְּאוּנָה וְשִׁפְתַי חֲכָמִים תִּשְׁמְרוּם:

In the mouth of a fool [the tongue] is the tool of his conceit, but the lips of wise men protect them.

This proverb calls attention to the tendency of a fool to reveal his poor character in his speech. His tongue is an instrument that is driven by his conceit to speak highly of himself. He would be advised to follow the example of wise men who have

learned that their lips are best able to protect their reputation by remaining closed.

Learning Mishlei

(ג) בְּפִי אֵוִיל חֶטֶר גְּאוּה
וְשִׁפְתַי חֲכָמִים תִּשְׁמֹרֵם:

In the mouth of a fool the tongue is the tool of his conceit – בְּפִי אֵוִיל חֶטֶר – **but the lips of wise men protect them – וְשִׁפְתַי חֲכָמִים תִּשְׁמֹרֵם** from making fools of themselves.

Additional Insights

A series of insights illuminating this proverb are presented below. The numbers identifying the insights refer to the listing of sources at the end of the segment.

Wisdom in Words

- (1) The word **חֶטֶר** may be translated as a rod or stick, representing the tongue. It is an instrument of conceit, such as was the case with Pharaoh who said, "*Who is Hashem that I should heed His voice.*" (*Shemos 5:2*)
- (2) The word **חֶטֶר** may also be translated as a branch, as we find in the verse, "*A branch will grow from the stump of Yishai*" (*Yeshayahu 11:1*). This creates a metaphor in which we can think of the root of conceit being in the heart, with the branch in the mouth. And if there is a branch, there is also fruit, which is in the form of the conceited words spoken by the fool.
- (3) The word **אֵוִיל** represents a certain type of fool, the kind whose foolishness derives from his skepticism. He questions the wisdom he hears from those wiser than he, and so he fails to heed the lessons they teach.

Other Insights

- (4) When you ask the conceited fool a question, he is likely to respond even if he doesn't know the answer, but a wise man keeps his lips sealed unless he is certain of what he is saying.
- (5) The fool likes to hear himself hold forth about his self-imagined excellence. Thus, the faculty of speech becomes a tool through which his pride grows.

Sources

The primary sources used for the additional insights illuminating this segment are listed below.

(4) - חנוך לנער

(5) - רשר"ה

(1) - רש"י

(2) - רבינו יונה

(3) - מלבי"ם

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