

Mishlei 14-05**Truth and Deception****Key Concepts**

A person should be self-disciplined in regard to speaking the truth at all times and in every circumstance. The ultimate image of truth telling is the role of a witness giving testimony in court. Giving false testimony is clearly a grave sin, but every person should develop his sensitivity for truth so that he cannot permit himself to utter a falsehood even in minor matters where a court judgment does not hang in the balance.

In effect, every teacher and parent is serving in the capacity of a witness in passing on the laws and traditions of the Torah to the next generation.

Devotion to truth affects the way a person speaks. If he is consciously speaking the truth his language will be clear and precise. His statements will have a finality about them because truth does not change. In contrast, a person who is careless about the truth, will prefer vague statements, which he is then constantly amending and reinterpreting. This frees him from the burden of assuring himself that everything he says passes the test of truth at the time it is spoken.

If a person is intentionally misstating facts in order to mislead the listener, he will be more likely to choose ambiguous expressions and phrases so that he will have the opportunity change his story if it is questioned along the way.

Exploring Mishlei

**(ה) עֵד אֱמוּנִים לֹא יִכְזֵב וְיִפְיֵחַ כְּזָבִים עַד שֶׁקֶר:
*An honest witness does not use deceptive language,
 but a false witness mumbles deceptions.***

This proverb compares the language used by the truth teller with that used by the liar. It reflects the circumstance of a court case, where the witness giving testimony often gives himself away by the way he expresses himself.

The importance of truth is also examined in the context of a court case in Mishlei segment 12-17. The proverb there contrasts the credibility of a witness who has developed a sensitivity to truth with the untrustworthiness of the habitual liar.

Learning Mishlei

An honest witness — עֵד אֱמוּנִים

speaks with clarity and finality.

He does not use deceptive language — לֹא יִכְזֵב

But if he mumbles deceptions — וַיִּפִּיחַ כְּזָבִים

he is a false witness — עֵד שֶׁקֶר

He avoids incriminating himself

by using ambiguities which he can later deny.

Additional Insights

Wisdom in Words

(1) The word **יִכְזֵב** refers to the kind of the deceptive language used by a person who uses lies intentionally to deceive and mislead. Such lies are filled with ambiguities that can easily be misinterpreted. However, the truth comes out in time. In contrast, **שֶׁקֶר**, falsehood, refers to statements that are immediately recognized as being false. (מלבי"ם)

(2) The word **וַיִּפִּיחַ** may be literally translated as “breathes.” It is used to describe the characteristic of deceptive speech in which the liar breathes or mumbles his words so that they lack finality. He follows up with elaborations which are likely to add to the confusion. (מלבי"ם)

(3) The word **וַיִּפִּיחַ** also suggests the person who is continually talking, like breathing. Since talk is cheap in his eyes, he is not motivated to watch what he says and avoid distortions of the truth. (רבינו יונה)

(4) The word **יִכְזֵב** also refers someone who does not fulfill his commitments, which is a serious offense even though his intentions were good. This is in contrast to **שֶׁקֶר** which refers to someone who lies blatantly and has no intention of doing what he promises. (הגר"א)

(5) A person who feels compelled to never speak a falsehood, no matter what the circumstance can be described as an **עֵד אֱמוּנִים**, an honest witness. (שבט מיהדה)

Other Insights

(6) The person who is habituated to give truthful testimony in court will be careful about speaking the truth even in matters unrelated to a court appearance. He knows that if he is careless about speaking the truth in everyday matters, this laxity will contaminate his self-discipline when he makes a formal testimony in court. (רבינו יונה, אבן יחיא)