

Mishlei 14-12

Discernment

Key Concepts

The wise person realizes that we live in a world of cause and effect. Everything that happens is associated with one or more earlier events that caused it or influenced it. Ultimately, the entire sequence of cause and effect is controlled and guided by Hashem, but He has granted us the power of free will so that we must be constantly weighing our decisions within the cause and effect framework.

Whenever we make a choice we need to use our intelligence to take into account the logical implications of our decision. That means we need to discern the significance of what we are about to do and try to distinguish it from similar options. Each action is like a path that we have chosen to follow and each path leads to many other possible paths. Even if the earlier path is a simple straight path, it may ultimately lead to destructive byways that will cause great harm.

A foolish person focuses all his attention on what he is doing now, disregarding the array of subsequent choices before him. He foolishly and lazily puts off thoughts of what may happen in the future.

Exploring Mishlei

(יב) יֵשׁ דֶּרֶךְ יֹשֵׁר לְפָנַי אִישׁ וְאַחֲרֵיהָ דְרָכֵי מָוֶת:

(12) *There may be a straight road before a man,
but at its end are the roads of death.*

This proverb suggests that a person faced with a seemingly straight road ahead of him should exercise discernment and take time to consider what it may lead to. What seems innocuous now may ultimately lead to roads of death.

Learning Mishlei

(12) There may be a straight road — יֵשׁ דֶּרֶךְ יֹשֵׁר —
before a man — לְפָנַי אִישׁ —

and he is glad to follow it, expecting a good outcome,

but he should ask himself whether the current road leads to other roads that are dangerously twisted, so that **at its end are the roads of death — וְאַחֲרֵיהֶן דְּרָכֵי מָוֶת.**

The quality of discernment involves thoughtful differentiation between similar options. It is related to the quality of shrewdness which involves awareness of what may reasonably be expected to happen under present conditions and how conditions are likely to change, depending on the choices he now makes. That quality was discussed in Mishlei 14-08 (Shrewdness).

.Additional Insights

(1) It is not enough to have a good heart; one must have intelligence as well. With intelligence comes discernment. A righteous person who lacks discernment may misinterpret what he sees on the initial straight road, and so he is vulnerable to the dangers in the roads that he subsequently encounters. (כתבי הסבא מקלם)

(2) The prophet said, **וְיִשְׁרִים דְּרָכֵי ה' וְצַדִּיקִים יֵלְכוּ בָם וּפְשָׁעִים יִכָּשְׁלוּ בָם**, "*The ways of Hashem are just — the righteous shall walk in them, but sinners will stumble over them.*" (Hoshea 14:10) But how can a person stumble over a road that is straight? That can be understood if we realize every straight road offers a warning of dangerous paths in the future. Righteous people heed the warning and avoid the danger; the sinners refuse to listen and find themselves on the roads of death. (כתבי הסבא מקלם)

(3) The straight road before a man is the way of *mitzvos*, but if he abandons this road he will find himself on the roads of death. (אבן עזרא)

(4) A person should be on guard because sometimes a road seems straight, yet it ends in the roads of death. (מצודות, רלב"ג, הגר"א רש"י)

(5) At first the smooth road of the wicked appears more attractive than the road that leads to wisdom, for the road to wisdom is full of obstacles to be overcome. In the end, however, the road of wickedness becomes rough and leads to death, while the road of the righteous becomes smooth and leads to life. (מלבים)