

Mishlei 14-13

Laughter

Key Concepts

It may seem that laughing and smiling are similar expressions of pleasure, but they are actually very different. A smile is a conscious act of kindness, which establishes a bond between people.

In contrast, laughter is an unconscious reaction to something perceived as funny or unexpected. It reflects an easing of self-control, which is why people under the influence of alcohol are more likely to laugh. Laughter in the service of mockery can be very cruel. Generally, laughter promotes a frivolous mood of diminished responsibility.

Laughter is an instrument of skepticism and sarcasm. Although it may serve a useful purpose, such as a temporary relief of tension, it tends to weaken recognition of the inherent seriousness of life. Even a teacher whose motives are for the best should be very sparing in his use of something as uninhibited and unpredictable as laughter.

Laughter is a superficial phenomenon which does not reflect the innermost feelings of a person. Thus, it is a way of covering up one's true feelings and can be a way of putting off a serious discussion.

There are times when people sharing a mood of laughter will feel closer. However, they need to be careful not to let the uncontrolled mood of gaiety get out of hand. Otherwise, tragedy may result. Unmitigated giddiness can turn into grief when thoughtless words are spoken.

Exploring Mishlei

(יג) גַּם בְּשִׂחֹק יִכָּאֵב לֵב וְאַחֲרֵיתָהּ שְׂמֵחָה תִּוְגָה :

(13) *Even in mirth the heart may ache and at its end joy becomes sorrow.*

This proverb reminds us that any joy in this world is limited. Laughter and mirth are only superficial. They cover up the aching heart. A period of joyful laughter will inevitably come to an end and there will be sorrow in its wake.

Learning Mishlei

(13) Even in mirth — גַּם בְּשִׂחֹק
the heart may ache — וַיִּכְאֵב לֵב,
and at its end — וְאַחֲרֵיתָהּ
joy becomes sorrow — שְׂמֵחָה תִּוְגֶה.

Additional Insights

- (1) It is impossible to attain pure and lasting joy in this temporal world. Even one's joy in children will be counterbalanced by the heartache of raising them. (הגר"א)
- (2) Laughter that is unconnected to the joy in a *mitzvah* leaves the better, nobler feelings in a man unsatisfied. (רשר"ה)
- (3) A man without moral discipline and restraint may laugh but his heart aches with inward bitterness. Even while he is enjoying himself, his innermost heart may already be in pain because he sees deep down that sorrow awaits. (מלבים)
- (4) For those who are wicked, even laughter and good times are tragic for they are followed by heartache in the World to Come. (רש"י)
- (5) A person who fritters away his time in laughter should expect to meet a reckoning in the World to Come. Then his unearned joy will be transformed into sorrow. (מצודות)