

Mishlei 14-10

Empathy

Key Concepts

True *chesed* (kindness) requires the ability to offer comfort when someone is dejected and to share their pleasure when they are experiencing joy. However, it is sometimes difficult to sense another person's mood, especially when we are preoccupied by our own concerns. Even if we sense what the other person is going through, it takes great wisdom to know what to say and when to say it.

No matter what our situation in life may happen to be, we all go through periods of bitterness and joy. That means, whether we are rich or poor, we are all candidates for the receiving end of *chesed*. Accordingly, it is important for everyone to realize that empathy is a scarce quality. Even those who are closest to us often fail to show a real understanding of our feelings.

Those who don't recognize this fact of life are destined to be severely disappointed from time to time. Tragically, disappointment in the behavior of others can lead to resentment, anger, and strife. While it is good to be grateful for the kindness and empathy that we receive, we should be fully prepared to be disappointed by a lack of empathy.

Ultimately, each of us is alone. Nobody knows what is in your heart other than your Creator, Who is with you at all times. It is therefore foolish to expect ordinary people, even those who love you, to always have this kind of awareness.

Exploring Mishlei

(י) לֵב יוֹדֵעַ מֵרַת נַפְשׁוֹ וּבִשְׂמֵחָתוֹ לֹא יִתְעַרֵּב זָר:

The heart knows the bitterness of its soul and no outsider can share its joy.

This proverb refers to the heart as the vessel of human emotion. There are times when it experiences bitterness and times when it experiences joy. But the heart is a private place and so the proverb reminds us not to be disappointed by the inability of another person to consistently understand it.

Learning Mishlei

(י) לֵב יוֹדֵעַ מֵרַת נַפְשׁוֹ
וּבְשִׂמְחָתוֹ לֹא יִתְעַרְבַּ זֶר:

The heart alone knows the bitterness of its soul – לֵב יוֹדֵעַ מֵרַת נַפְשׁוֹ, and no outsider can share the full experience of its joy – וּבְשִׂמְחָתוֹ לֹא יִתְעַרְבַּ זֶר.

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.

- (1) Just as pain can't be shared fully with someone else, neither can joy. Therefore, one shouldn't expect total empathy from others. Such expectations cause great disappointment when they aren't fulfilled.
- (2) It is not advisable to convey one's inner suffering to others. They might not appreciate the situation, and make light of it, causing only more pain.
- (3) It is also not advisable to dwell excessively on one's good fortune. It is better to maintain a low profile and avoid provoking envy.
- (4) We sometimes find a clear relationship between the experience of pain and the subsequent joy in good fortune. This means that only those who have suffered pain can appreciate the joy that comes afterward. The special joy of gaining insight into a difficult topic of the Talmud is reserved for the one who has labored to grasp it.

Sources

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

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| (1) - דעת סופרים | (3) - המאירי |
| (2) - דעת סופרים | (4) - הגר"א, משנת רבי אהרן |

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