

Mishlei 14-14

Complacency

Key Concepts

It is natural for people to want to feel good about themselves and to be happy with whatever level of effort they are expending on doing *mitzvos*. This attitude can be helpful in supporting the mental stability everyone needs to succeed in life. However, a person also needs to be aware that it is a recipe for mediocrity. Finding the proper balance between complacency and anxiety is the challenge that everyone should be prepared to face.

A person who is comfortable with mediocrity will not be able to grow in character and wisdom. He will not be able to engage in the continuous improvement that the Creator expects of him. Furthermore, everyone is subject to the continuing deterioration of self-discipline as a result of temptation and weariness. Thus, by accepting a static level of personal achievement, a man is likely to regress.

To stimulate continuing personal growth in doing *mitzvos*, a person should live with the *yirah* (fear) of failing in his duty to Hashem. If he avoids complacency and accepts the motivating force provided by this fear, he will be ready to question his own thinking. He will be in a continuing search for truth and will be open to advice and guidance from the wise people of his generation.

Exploring Mishlei

(יד) מְדַרְכָּיו יִשְׁבֵּעַ סוּג לֵב וּמַעְלִיו אִישׁ טוֹב:

**The evasive heart is satisfied with its ways,
but the good man turns from himself.**

This proverb refers to a complacent man as an individual with an evasive heart (סוג לב). The heart, representing his mind, resists any advice or thoughts that question the rightness of what he is doing and how he is behaving. Such a self-satisfied man is not a “good” man because only a good man will accept self-improvement as a critical motivating force in his life. The good man looks beyond himself for his goals. He is eager to accept guidance and advice from those who are wiser than he.

The message of complacency is also addressed in Mishlei Segment 12-15 (Wisdom and Humility). The proverb in that segment teaches that it is a sign of humility to resist complacency. In the absence of humility, a person's instinctive pride causes him to assume he is right and there is no need to consult with anyone.

Learning Mishlei

(14) **Satisfied with his ways — מְדַרְכָּיו יִשְׁבַּע —**
is the evasive heart — סוּג לֵב,
but turning from himself — וּמֵעַלָּיו
is the good man — אִישׁ טוֹב —
 who looks for guidance from wiser men.

Additional Insights

- (1) The complacent man (סוּג לֵב) relies on his own thinking and doesn't consult with anyone else to determine whether their opinion might be more valid than his own. He assumes that there is no faulty logic in his own thoughts because he is totally confident in the clarity of his thinking. He never actually investigates his own opinions for in most cases he adopts the first conclusion that comes to mind. (רבינו יונה)
- (2) The archetype of a complacent man was Esav who was happy with his life as a hunter and resisted the opportunity to learn from the wisdom of his brother Yaakov. (רש"י)
- (3) The good man turns away from a close association with the complacent man. He wants to avoid anyone who draws the wrath of Hashem upon him. (רש"י)
- (4) The good man avoids the complacent man because he has found that he cannot have any positive effect on him, seeing that the complacent man is resistant to instruction or guidance. (המוסר והדעת)
- (5) The complacent man performs *mitzvos* to meet his obligation rather than with a sense of serving Hashem. Thus, his actions are by rote and mechanical in nature, geared to outward appearances. (חסיד יעב"ץ)
- (6) The good man does not satisfy himself with his own ways, but with ways of the man who is superior to him in wisdom and saintliness, the man he seeks to emulate. (חסיד יעב"ץ)