

## Mishlei 14-23

# Effort

### Key Concepts

Experience teaches that to achieve a worthwhile result, a person needs to expend effort. The trouble is that real effort involves the pain of having to expend physical and mental energy. Accordingly, many people are willing to forego the benefits that come from engaging in focused activity or work. They may try to manage as long as they can without those benefits.

However, since doing nothing for any period of time can be boring and unpleasant, such people are tempted to occupy their available time with a passive or unfocused form of activity. This can be entertaining but is ultimately not gratifying. Mishlei teaches that not only is passive activity unrewarding it is ultimately harmful.

An example of a passive activity that Mishlei frowns upon is idle conversation. Harm can come about through the consequences of wasting valuable time or the temptations of destructive and sinful talk.

### Exploring Mishlei

(כג) בְּכֹל עֵצָב יִהְיֶה מוֹתֵר וּדְבַר שְׁפָתַיִם אֵד לְמַחְסוֹר:

***For every effort there is a useful result,  
but for empty words there is only loss.***

This proverb compares the results of activity involving the expenditure of effort with passive activity. If effort is required and if the purpose is good, one can be assured of some gain or useful result. The more effort that is invested, the greater is the benefit.

In comparing this with the results of passive activity, the proverb uses idle conversation as an example. Such conversation is identified as "words of the lips" to imply that these words involve a minimum of thought. Time spent on such words results in a loss instead of a benefit. In fact, the more idle words one speaks, the greater is the potential harm.

## Learning Mishlei

(23) **For every effort** — **בְּכָל עֵצָב**,  
 that you undertake, you can expect that  
**there will be a benefit** — **יְהִיָּה מוֹתֵר**  
 corresponding to what you put into it  
**but a word of the lips** [empty talk] — **וְדָבַר שְׁפָתַיִם**  
 brings **only loss** — **אֶךְ לְמַחְסוֹר**.

## Additional Insights

(1) Wisdom that is expressed only through words is limited by the lack of substance. However, wisdom that is expressed through physical behavior will be effective in gaining access to the World to Come. (המאירי)

(2) A person who is expending effort tends to be serious about what he is doing, because effort involves discomfort and thought. In contrast a person engaged in idle conversation tends to be thoughtless and unserious. The conversation tends to be oriented to finding humor in every situation. (המאירי)

(3) The word used here for effort (**עֵצָב**) implies sadness because expenditure of effort is a serious matter. Indirectly the proverb is also teaching that there is a benefit in sorrow. This is because sorrow subdues the evil inclination (*yetzer ha-ra*), promotes repentance and cultivates humility. (אלשיך)

(4) Another interpretation of the proverb points to a spiritual benefit from silence in which a person sorrowfully regrets his sins. In contrast, loudly complaining about one's misfortune results in a spiritual loss. (מלבי"ם)