

Mishlei 14-20

Social Classes

Key Concepts

The attitude of one person toward another is often affected by class. People tend to be more at ease with others of the same social class, whether in terms of wealth or education. As a result, they will instinctively seek to associate with others that fall close to them in the social scale. When it comes to material wealth, this tendency has mostly negative implications. Mishlei teaches us to recognize these innate tendencies and make a conscious effort to overcome them. We should especially avoid judging people based on their material wealth.

For example, people tend to have a negative attitude to those of a lower class, especially to those who are very poor. Instead of sympathizing with those who are experiencing hard times, people will try to distance themselves from the unfortunate. Subconsciously, they may assume the impoverished have brought their problems upon themselves through unwise or choices or lack of energy in pursuing a livelihood. Or they may simply fear being looked down upon themselves as a result of their association with a poorer person.

Thus, people who are very poor may be held in low regard even by their fellows who aspire to be thought of as better off. Thus, the people at the lowest rungs of society may find themselves with few friends.

However, people with wealth will naturally attract admirers, such as those hoping to gain some advantage from having made useful friendships. Unfortunately, all of these tendencies bring out the worst in human nature and can lead to sinful behavior. Therefore they need to be identified and controlled.

Exploring Mishlei

(כ) גַּם לְרַעְהוּ יִשְׁנֵא רֶשׁ וְאַהֲבֵי עֲשִׂיר רַבִּים: (כא) בָּז לְרַעְהוּ חוּטֵא וּמְחוּנָן עֲנִיִּים
עֲנִיִּים אֲשֶׁרֵי:

(20) A poor person is despised even by his fellow, but many are those who admire the rich man. (21) He who shames his fellow man is a sinner, but he who is gracious to the humble is praiseworthy.

The first of these two related proverbs comments on the natural tendency of people

to look down upon the poor. This tendency is so pronounced that even among the poor one may try to show that he is better off than his neighbors. In contrast, there are many who admire the rich, hoping to gain some advantage from being associated with them.

The second proverb shows how these subconscious attitudes affect behavior. The tendency to look down upon people of a lower class results in thoughtless and cruel remarks to preserve the class difference. The second proverb ends with an important lesson. That is to be gracious and consider to every man, especially to the humble.

Learning Mishlei

(כ) גַּם לַרְעֵהוּ יִשְׁנָא רֵשׁ
וְאֶהְבֵּי עֹשִׂיר רַבִּים:

A poor person is despised even by his fellow — גַּם לַרְעֵהוּ יִשְׁנָא רֵשׁ, who is afraid of being judged as poor as his neighbor. **But many are those who admire the rich man** — וְאֶהְבֵּי עֹשִׂיר רַבִּים, for they hope to gain advantage through being associated with him.

(כא) בָּז לַרְעֵהוּ חוֹטֵא
וּמְחַוֵּן עֲנוּיִם אֲשֶׁרִיו:

He who shames his fellow man, whether rich or poor, **is a sinner** — בָּז לַרְעֵהוּ חוֹטֵא, **but he who is considerate to the humble and poor is praiseworthy** — וּמְחַוֵּן עֲנוּיִם אֲשֶׁרִיו.

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) He who despises another person transgresses the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself (*Vayikra* 19:18).

(2) Since many admire the rich man, he is vulnerable to arrogance and to being influenced by flatterers. But giving charity to the very poor is true kindness, for the poor are ashamed to flatter or to openly receive gifts.

(3) At times an unfortunate person presents an unattractive appearance, as a result of his misery and poverty. Woe to him who lets himself be induced to contempt by a man's run-down appearance. Blessings upon him who sees

through the exterior of such an unfortunate person, right through to his innermost yearning for compassion, and who, by a comforting act, lifts up his spirit.

(4) A very poor person is often defenceless when someone takes advantage of him. This is because everyone looks down upon the very poor, so there is no one to stand up for him.

Sources

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

(3) - רשר"ה

(4) - רבינו יונה

(1) - אלשיך

(2) - אלשיך