

Mishlei 14-24

Distinction

Key Concepts

A wise person who is impoverished may find it difficult to share his wisdom with others because of the false impression that poverty makes. They don't give him the respect and attention that facilitate transmission of knowledge. However, if a wise person is blessed with some degree of wealth, it gives him a mark of distinction that encourages people to be drawn to what he has to say.

Because a wise person has developed self-control he is likely to use the leisure time provided by his wealth to continue expanding the depth and breadth of his learning.

Furthermore, a wise person is empowered by the distinction that wealth confers upon him to exert positive leadership in the community. He is sure to promote Torah and charitable projects. Thus, his wealth will be a crown, an adornment that enables him to fulfill his mission in the world.

In contrast foolish people use wealth to satisfy their whims and desires. For such people their wealth is nothing more than foolishness because that is the purpose it will serve. Foolish people can easily be ruined by their wealth because of its effect on their character.

Exploring Mishlei

(כד) עֲטֹרַת חֲכָמִים עֲשָׂרָם אֲוֶלֶת כְּסִילִים אֲוֶלֶת:

(24) *An adornment (crown) of the wise is their wealth.*

The foolishness of fools which is their wealth is but foolishness.

This proverb compares the wise and the foolish in regard to their employment of wealth. For the wise, wealth becomes a mark of distinction and enables them to be more effective, whereas for the foolish wealth is an extension of their foolishness and has no redeeming virtue. On the contrary, it provides opportunities for their foolishness to be intensified.

Learning Mishlei

(24) When blessed with riches,
an adornment of the wise — עֲטָרַת חֲכָמִים
is their wealth — עֲשָׂרָם.

In contrast the wealth of fools is nothing but foolishness.

For them, **the foolishness of fools — אֲוֵלַת כְּסִילִים**
is foolishness — אֲוֵלַת

and nothing else, since it serves no other purpose.

Additional Insights

(1) When the wise are blessed with wealth, their influence in the community is enhanced. They are in a position to help the needy and inspire people in *avodas Hashem*. They are also in a position to suppress the influence of the wicked.
 (רבינו יונה)

(2) A wise man should seek to acquire a limited amount of wealth in an honorable way, but only to the extent that it helps him enhance his *avodas Hashem* and exert a positive influence on his community. (אבן עזרא, המאירי)

(3) A crown is an adornment of nobility which distinguishes the one who wears it from other men. Just as it is the responsibility of a wise man to distinguish himself in wisdom and Torah knowledge, he should distinguish himself in his *middos* and his general behavior — the way he conducts business, the way he talks and walks, and the way he dresses. (המאירי)

(4) The very same wealth that makes a wise man more effective, brings ruin to a fool. It is like the sun, which bleaches clothing, but darkens the skin of the one who washes it. Wealth can ruin the life of the fool by tempting him to act unwisely. It can go to his head and make him feel that he is superior. When a wise man acquires wealth, he is careful not to be harmed by it. That is a measure of his wisdom. (רבינו בחיי)

(5) Another interpretation of the proverb suggests that the foolishness of the fools corresponds to the wealth of the wise. Just as the wealth enables them to develop their wisdom, the foolishness of the fool points to further foolishness buried within them, and ready to be revealed at the appropriate time. (מצודות)

(6) Another interpretation of the proverb identifies the wealth of the wise as their knowledge of Torah. The foolishness of the fools is their neglecting Torah study. According to this interpretation, the lesson is that a wise man should avoid material wealth and should be careful not to abase himself to gain the favor of the wealthy. He should take pride in his Torah knowledge, which is true wealth.
(רש"י, מלבי"ם, שבט מיהודה)