

Mishlei 14-35

Competence

Key Concepts

The quality of an individual who takes on responsibilities in an enterprise or a home is measured by that person's competence at fulfilling his duties. In that sense competence is not a matter of skill or manual dexterity, but intelligence. The competent person realizes that the job will not get done unless the necessary steps are taken to achieve it.

By employing his intelligence and his strength of character the competent person defines his goals and determines the actions that will be needed to achieve them. He also determines what resources and outside help he will need. Meanwhile he is conscious of the time factor, taking into account when a result is needed and how long each step in the process will take.

There are often conflicts in the availability of resources and the needs of those who benefit from the final result. At the same time, there are risks of things going wrong because of unexpected events or unexpected behavior by others. The competent person plans ahead by evaluating the priorities and risks. He continually updates his plans as time passes.

A person who takes responsibility for his life and his duties may be doing all of these things unconsciously. But if he is a competent person, he will put as much conscious effort as needed into what he is doing.

Ultimately the success of the competent person is measured in the goodwill of those who depend on him, such as his employer or his family. Furthermore, Hashem looks to each of us to show competence in the way we fulfill our duties towards Him. Thus, the considerations described above will affect how we perform *mitzvos* and how we live our lives.

Exploring Mishlei

(לה) רצון מלך לעבד משפיל ועברתו תהיה מביש :

**(35) A king is pleased by an intelligent servant,
but his wrath is upon the one that acts shamefully.**

This proverb uses the analogy of a king to illustrate the idea of competence. The king symbolizes anyone in a leadership role who looks to others to provide services

that will achieve worthwhile goals. In our society the king might be an employer or project leader. It might be a father or mother who are constantly interacting with their children or a teacher who is interacting with his students.

The one upon whom the king depends is described as intelligent if he acts with competence. Through the use of active intelligence the individual manages his own activities to achieve success. That is what pleases the king because it enables him to fulfill his own goals. The servant who fails the test of competence will disappoint the king and earn his displeasure. To the king that servant is an embarrassment or shame.

Some of the concepts introduced by this proverb are also relevant to the proverb in Mishlei segment 10-05 (Responsibility). There they are described in terms of the behavior of sons of a farming family. The father is either gratified or shamed by his son depending on whether he shows competence, that is, depending on whether he acts with dedication or neglect.

Learning Mishlei

(35) **A king is pleased** — רָצוֹן מֶלֶךְ
 by the competence **of an intelligent servant** — לְעֶבֶד מְשָׁפִיל
but his wrath is incurred by — וְעִבְרָתוֹ תִּהְיֶה
the shameful servant — מִבֵּישׁ .
 because of his incompetence.

Additional Insights

(1) Even if the competent servant makes a mistake, the king will overlook it because of the servant's value and general competence, but the shameful servant who acts irresponsibly and is controlled by his baser tendencies will never be trusted by the king. (מצודות)

(2) The competent servant is driven by a sense of enthusiasm and urgency (zerizus). He is goal-oriented and focuses on the end result. (מלבי"ם)

(3) The shameful servant procrastinates and loses track of the purpose he is supposed to achieve. (מלבי"ם)

(4) Hashem favors the intelligent servant who performs *mitzvos* out of love and reverence. He is disappointed by the servant who performs *mitzvos* for selfish reasons or out of habit. But the servant will still be paid his reward for the *mitzvos* he has performed. (רבינו יונה)