

Mishlei 15-12

Willfulness

Key Concepts

Free will is one of the greatest gifts granted to us by Hashem. We treasure it as we should, but we often abuse it by rejecting advice and criticism. Many people fiercely resist any constraints on what they perceive as their freedom of action. They say, "Don't tell me what to do!" They don't even want to hear ideas which run counter to what they have already decided upon, either consciously or unconsciously.

One of the ways of exercising willfulness is by ridiculing moral and ethical standards that constrain a person's perceived freedom of action. By refusing to take guidance or rebuke seriously, the scoffer (לץ) attempts to diminish its hold upon him.

This presents challenges to anyone who feels the need to criticize a willful person. The willful person resents any constraint because it interferes with the freedom that he has come to believe is what defines him as a person. And so, the willful person grows to hate wise men and will avoid coming into contact with them.

The opposite of willfulness is submissiveness. A person who practices submissiveness is ready to receive criticism if he respects and trusts the one who is offering guidance. If a child is not taught the virtue of submissiveness at a young age, he may find it difficult to acquire at a later stage in life unless he is exposed to much more than simple criticism.

Exploring Mishlei

(יב) לֹא יֶאֱהָבֶלֶץ הַזֹּכֵחַ לוֹ אֶל־חֲכָמִים לֹא יֵלֵךְ :

***A scoffer has no love for the one who criticizes him;
he does not go to the wise.***

This proverb can best be appreciated if compared with a similar proverb, which appears earlier in Segment 09-07 (The Rejection of Wisdom). That proverb in Mishlei verse 9:8 is addressed to the teachers of each generation and reminds them of the need to be selective in their efforts. They must realize that there are people such as

scoffers who will reject the invitation to the wisdom of the Torah and its criticisms of their behavior.

(ח) אֵל תּוֹכַח לֵץ פֶּן יִשְׂנֹאֲךָ הוֹכַח לְחָכָם וַיֶּאֱהָבֶךָ:
(8) Don't criticize a scoffer, lest he hate you,
but criticize a wise man, and he will love you. (Mishlei 9:8)

The earlier proverb warned the teacher that what he has to say to the scoffer will bring him nothing but ill will. If he wants love, he should focus his efforts on someone who has already gained the first step to wisdom.

According to Tehillim that first step is the fear of Hashem, as it says, **רֵאשִׁית חֲכָמָה יְרֵאת ה'** (111:10). Such a person is motivated to acquire Torah wisdom because he believes in its value.

Learning Mishlei

The current proverb tells us a little more about the scoffer's reaction to criticism. First of all, the teacher should not expect love. In fact, the scoffer will avoid him altogether. The scoffer will stay away from any place where there are learned people. He knows that his feeble attempts at mocking humor will not be enough to insulate him from the guilt he feels.

(יב) לֹא יֶאֱהָבֶלֶץ הוֹכַח לוֹ אֶל־חֲכָמִים לֹא יֵלֶךְ:
A scoffer has no love for the one who criticizes him;
he does not go to the wise.

(12) A scoffer does not love — לֹא יֶאֱהָבֶלֶץ
the one who criticizes him — הוֹכַח לוֹ
Therefore, he does not go to the wise — אֶל־חֲכָמִים לֹא יֵלֶךְ
 In fact, the scoffer will stay away from any place where there are learned people.

Additional Insights

(1) The character of the scoffer is revealed by his reluctance to attend a place of learning. (חבל נחלה)

(2) If the scoffer does go to a place of learning but finds more criticism than inspiration there, he may be inclined to reject Torah wisdom. (רלב"ג)

(3) One of the factors that discourage a person from responding positively to criticism is the lack of a personal bond with the one who is criticizing him. (אבן יחיאל)

(4) The scoffer may not react well to criticism but there is always a possibility that if he goes to a place of learning on his own, he will be inspired by the behavior of the people there. (שבט מיהודה)