

Mishlei 15-16

Value

(Pesukim 15:16 and 15:17)

Key Concepts

Every person should think about the relationship between the effort he expends to earn his living and the value of what he acquires. Depending on the vocation he chooses, the amount of effort may be excessive and out of proportion to what he gets out of it.

Some vocations have a far higher cost to the individual and his family than is immediately apparent. Among these costs are the time that he must devote to his career. Many vocations require a great investment of time and energy, thereby diminishing what is available for doing *mitzvos*, learning Torah, and maintaining domestic bliss.

Other vocations expose the individual to great risk, whether it be financial risk or spiritual risk. Financial risk arises when the business conditions of his chosen career are uncertain. Spiritual risk arises when there is a strong temptation to act dishonestly or commit other serious offenses. The negative effects of such risk can include tension, turmoil, guilt, and unhappiness.

To make the right choices a person should be guided by *yiras Hashem*, that is, a sense of awareness of what Hashem would want him to do in every situation. If he follows that guideline, he can anticipate a clear conscience and domestic peace and harmony. This outcome has such a high value that it makes up for the dreams of great wealth that often remain unfulfilled. Even if he acquires the means to live in luxury, the accompanying recriminations and domestic discord can make the richest meal worthless, and the choicest foods taste bitter.

A person who is conscious of his spiritual existence keeps in mind that there are higher values beyond the material. He knows that it is possible to be satisfied and happy with little. He knows that everything he has is by divine decree and whatever he doesn't have is because he doesn't deserve it or need it.

Exploring Mishlei

Mishlei offers two proverbs here to express some of the value choices which a person must make in planning his career through life.

(טז) טוב מעט ביראת ה' מאוצר רב ומהומה בו:

**(16) Better a little gained with fear of Hashem,
than a great treasure accompanied with turmoil.**

The first proverb draws attention to the efforts needed to earn a livelihood and their cost. The key value that should dominate the individual's thinking is *yiras Hashem*. No amount of great wealth can compensate for the sacrifice of that ideal. The price to be paid when *yiras Hashem* is neglected is turmoil, that is, guilt and recrimination, either from close family and friends or from the victims of his selfish and dishonest dealings.

(יז) טוב ארחת ירק ואהבה שם משור אבוס ושאנה בו:

**(17) Better a dish of vegetables where there is love
than a fattened ox where there is hatred.**

The second proverb addresses the quality of what the individual gains through his efforts at earning a living or acquiring wealth. That quality is visualized in terms of food, the essential condition for survival. A person should think in terms of the least he needs to function effectively, rather than what it would be nice to have.

That requirement is symbolized by a simple dish of vegetables. It is compared with luxurious foods, such as beef from a fattened ox which ordinary people eat only on special occasions. What should a person sacrifice for luxuries? He should not sacrifice the love of a happy home, a love that can only be achieved through patient attention to the emotional needs of those around him.

Learning Mishlei

**(16) Better a little gained — טוב מעט —
with fear of Hashem — ביראת ה',
than a great treasure — מאוצר רב —
accompanied with turmoil — ומהומה בו**

**(17) Better a dish of vegetables — טוב ארחת ירק —
where there is love — ואהבה שם —
than a fattened ox — משור אבוס —
where there is hatred — ושאנה בו**

Additional Insights

(1) A person's first priority must be the efforts required by *yiras Hashem*. Even if very little remains to him after fulfilling those duties, he should see it as far better than even a great treasure which comes at the price of failing to justify his existence in the eyes of his Creator. (מלבי"ם, רשר"ה)

(2) The risks involved in gaining wealth are also valid in gaining honor and respect in society, even if the outward trappings are Torah knowledge and recognition. To become a great Torah scholar demands a great investment of time and energy. One must carefully examine one's motives and the price that must be paid for him to achieve his aspirations. Ultimately the spiritual value of what he has gained will be judged on high. (הגר"א)