

Mishlei 15-19

Responsibility

Key Concepts

A responsible person sets goals for himself and focuses his energies on doing what it takes to achieve them. He is decisive and determined. When he encounters obstacles, he is not discouraged, but works with perseverance to overcome them. He is conscious of his duty and resists distractions that interfere with his concentration.

A lazy person is irresponsible. He is easily distracted by obstacles and alternative objectives. He magnifies potential obstacles and looks for excuses to justify inaction or switching goals.

Exploring Mishlei

(יט) דֶּרֶךְ עֲצִיל כַּמְשַׁכֶּת חֲדָק וְאַרְחַ יִשְׂרָיִם סְלֵלָה :

*The road of the lazy person seems barred with thorns,
but the narrow path of the upright is well-paved.*

In this proverb the lazy person is compared with those who are goal-oriented in terms of their reaction to obstacles. The lazy person is quick to find obstacles that will prevent him from proceeding in his project. Even if the road he is following is a well-traveled highway he is convinced there are thorns that bar his way and so he is excused from continuing.

In contrast those who are responsible are goal-oriented. Even if they are following a narrow path, they will minimize any obstacles they encounter. As far as they are concerned it is a well paved road.

This is the fourth proverb dealing with the causes and consequences of laziness. The four proverbs may be summarized as follows:

Focused Thinking. Focused thinking is the opposite of wishful thinking, which is what happens when a person is too lazy to expend the energy necessary to do what needs to be done. Instead, he lets matters take their course while hoping for the best. [06-06]

Laziness. This proverb suggests that we view ourselves as a faithful employee who receives specific tasks to fulfill. The lazy worker fails to give the task his full energy. The proverb emphasizes that a person who approaches a task with laziness will likely cause harm instead of the anticipated benefit the task was supposed to provide. *“Like vinegar to the teeth and like smoke to the eyes, so is a lazy man to those who send him.”* [10-26]

Responsibility. This proverb explores the economic consequences of the neglectful attitude practiced by a lazy person. It is compared with the rewards of dedication to one’s duty. *“The responsible son gathers his crops, even in the late summer, but the shameful son is already asleep at harvest time in early summer.”* [10-05]

Responsibility. The lazy person sees obstacles even when there are none. In contrast the upright, responsible person takes an optimistic attitude to the quality of the road and perseveres through any obstacles. *“The road of the lazy person seems barred with thorns, but the narrow path of the upright is well-paved.”* [15-19]

Learning Mishlei

(19) The road of the lazy man — דֶּרֶךְ עֲצֵל
seems to be barred with thorns — כַּמְשַׁכֵּת תְּדָק,
but even the narrow path — וְאַרְחַ
of the upright is well-paved — יְשָׁרִים סֶלְלָה

Additional Insights

(1) The quality of taking responsibility is based on the word יָשָׁר, straight. The responsible person has his eye on the goal and heads straight for it in the shortest way he can. He resists getting distracted from that straight path. (רשר"ה)

(2) To one who hates hard work, life is like a narrow trail through a field of thorns. To the upright person (יָשָׁר) it is a series of challenges to be overcome. (רלב"ג, מצודות, דעת סופרים)

(3) Whenever someone faces obstacles, he must honestly search his soul to determine whether they are real, or only an illusion created by his desire to avoid doing the job. If real, he must then search for alternative ways of reaching his goal. (דעת סופרים)

(4) The lazy person is always on the lookout for the easiest possible way to go, but this is not necessarily the wisest choice and so the way that begins as a דֶּרֶךְ, may end up blocked by thorns. In contrast, the upright person (יֵשָׁר) is not daunted by the difficult choice (אֲרוּחַ), and so in the end he reaches the section that is paved (סֶלֶלָה). (הגר"א)