

Mishlei 15-24

Upwards

Key Concepts

Every person is continually choosing between his physical needs and his spiritual needs. However, physical needs and desires are immediately visible and pressing, and therefore people are inclined to give priority to them. For a person to respond to his spiritual needs he needs to think about them first. This takes a degree of intelligence as well as training in how to make use of that intelligence. He needs to actively think about his life and his goals over the long run rather than the immediate gratification of physical desires.

An intelligent person who takes the time to think realizes that there is a path of life, involving continued spiritual growth over time. Instead of focusing his efforts on satisfying material desires, a person on such a path actively chooses to do what is right and good in every situation. This path of life is called an upward path because it leads to an ever higher spiritual level. It brings him ever closer to his Creator Who is patiently waiting for him to make upward progress on his path.

However, progress is often slow because there is a great temptation to give in to the power of one's physical concerns. Without constant effort the individual is likely to slow down and fall back. But if he strives to overcome the natural forces pulling him back he will be rewarded with spiritual serenity in this life and ultimately with eternal spiritual happiness in the World to Come,

On the other hand if an individual lets himself be pulled back down by the ever-present material demands and becomes immersed in their gratification, his downward path can be expected to lead to disappointment and unhappiness, and ultimately to eternal spiritual death.

Exploring Mishlei

(כד) אַרְחַח חַיִּים לְמַעַלָּה לְמִשְׁכִּיל לְמַעַן סוּר מִשְׂאוֹל מָטָה:

(24) For the intelligent person the path of life leads upwards [in continued spiritual growth to be rewarded with eternal spiritual life], so that he will avoid the spiritual Grave [of eternal destruction] below.

This proverb identifies the existence of an upward path of life but suggests that those who choose it are people of intelligence. Keeping on this path is necessary to avoid the downward spiral ending up in a spiritual Grave, whose precise character is

left undefined in the Book of Mishlei.

The concept of life as an upward path is an extension of earlier discussions in Mishlei. In Segment 04-03 we have seen how Mishlei introduces us to the Wisdom Road, a road of life involving many side-roads and choices along the way. The danger of choosing the wrong road is explored in Segment 04-04 and the importance of staying on course with watchful vigilance (zehirus) is elaborated upon in Segment 04-05.

Learning Mishlei

(כד) אֲרַח חַיִּים לְמַעַלָּה לְמִשְׁכָּבִיל
לְמַעַן סוּר מִשְׂאוֹל מָטָה:

The path of life leads upward — אֲרַח חַיִּים לְמַעַלָּה for the intelligent person — לְמִשְׁכָּבִיל, who strives to do the will of His Creator **so that — לְמַעַן** he will have continued spiritual growth and spiritual serenity. He realizes that in doing so he will ultimately be rewarded with eternal life and that his soul will return to its spiritual Source above. He will **avoid** the downward path of immersion in earthly pleasures for he knows that they will ultimately lead to **the spiritual Grave** of eternal destruction **below — סוּר מִשְׂאוֹל מָטָה**.

Additional Insights

A series of additional insights illuminating this proverb are presented below. The numbers identifying the insights refer to the listing of sources at the end of the segment.

- (1) By choosing the upward path we are observing the wish of our Creator and fulfilling his goal in Creating us.
- (2) The ultimate aspiration of the upward path is the soul's desire to return to its spiritual Source.
- (3) Making upward progress is difficult because one has to overcome the downward gravitational force of the material world. But the knowledge that he is in danger of falling into the abyss can give a person the strength and courage he needs to keep going.
- (4) It is not possible to stand or sit idle on the path of life. If one is not moving upwards he will inevitably slide downwards.

Sources

The primary sources used for the additional insights illuminating this segment are listed below.

מלבי"ם - (3)

הגר"א - (4)

אבן עזרא - (1)

מצודות - (2)