

Mishlei 15-27

Greed

Key Concepts

Many people are affected by a powerful urge to acquire physical possessions, far beyond their actual needs. When the urge becomes overwhelming it can block out rational judgment and lead the avaricious person to disregard the interests of others, even to the extent of cheating, accepting bribes, and robbery.

The middah of greed is typically a reflection of an overdeveloped ego. The person has an emotional hunger that wants to be fed by the sense of ownership and control of assets. Since naked greed is not a socially acceptable middah, those who are affected by it often make up excuses to explain their urge to themselves and others. For example they may claim they need wealth to provide for their family, now and in the future.

Mishlei asks the greedy individual to stop and think about the harm he is doing. His self-centered addiction to building his wealth or acquiring possessions will ultimately cause great harm to himself and his family. The corrupting influence of dishonestly acquired assets will destroy his good name and destroy the self-respect of those he cares for. His family may even end up being deprived of the necessities of life so that the head of their household can indulge his greed.

Mishlei advises the greedy person to restrain his acquisitive nature by developing the reverse attitude. Let him learn to hate any possessions beyond his needs. Not only should he avoid benefiting from ill-gotten gains, he should have a negative attitude to any benefit that he has not earned through hard work or sacrifice.

Exploring Mishlei

(כז) עֵכָר בֵּיתוֹ בּוֹצֵעַ בְּצַע וְשׂוֹנֵא מִתְּנַת יְחִיָּה:

(27) The one who is greedy for personal gain besmirches his own house, but the one who hates gifts will live.

This proverb draws attention to the negative consequences of the dishonest acquisition of unneeded possessions and suggests that such behavior is driven by a bad middah — greed. Because the source of the gain is perverted, the effect of the corruption is likely to be felt by the very household that he claims is his reason for building his empire of acquisitions.

In conclusion, the proverb offers guidance to the individual who is subject to greed. Let him learn to hate anything that comes into his possession which he has not earned.

Learning Mishlei

(כז) עֵכָר בֵּיתוֹ בּוֹצֵעַ בְּצַע
וְשׂוֹנֵא מִתְּנַת יְחִיָּה:

The one who is greedy for personal gain besmirches his own house — עֵכָר בֵּיתוֹ בּוֹצֵעַ בְּצַע because his behavior corrupts everything he touches. **But the one who hates gifts will live — וְשׂוֹנֵא מִתְּנַת יְחִיָּה.** Long life will be the reward self-restraint.

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) Hating gifts is an extreme case, but if a person learns to hate gifts from other people, he will surely hate dishonest profit. Hashem will reward him with long life, which is a gift that no human being could give him.

(2) The proverb gives us two extremes so that we can learn to avoid negative behavior (dishonest gain) and work towards the goal of positive behavior (rejecting the opportunity for unearned gifts).

(3) The word **בְּצַע** can have any one of three related meanings (a) stolen goods (b) general benefit or gain, (c) the pursuit of wealth for its own sake. In our context the primary meaning is the last.

(4) There are people who are so besotted with the pursuit of wealth that they allow their family to suffer the lack of food and clothing to protect their unneeded cash flow.

Sources

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

(2) - המאירי
(2) - חנוך לנער

(1) - רש"י, מצודות
(2) - רבינו יונה