

Mishlei 15-31

Criticism

Key Concepts

It takes a wise and humble person to welcome criticism. People lacking humility would like to believe they have little room for improvement. Therefore, they see any attempt at criticism as motivated by ill-will.

The ear is the organ of the body associated with criticism and with knowledge. The people who resist criticism are often the ones who resist learning. That is because both criticism and knowledge place demands on the listener, often requiring him to change in some way, if nothing else, to accept his own limitations.

Mishlei advises the individual to develop an attitude of being receptive to criticism and knowledge, for both are a source of life. A person with such an attitude will want to spend as much time as he can in the company of people who have the wisdom and the good will to offer both criticism and knowledge in a form that it is likely to be well-received.

Exploring Mishlei

(לא) אֵזֶן שְׁמַעַת תּוֹכַחַת חַיִּים בְּקֶרֶב חֲכָמִים תִּלְוֶן:

(31) *For an ear to hear life-giving criticism let it abide in the midst of the wise.*

This proverb addresses itself to the person who has developed his character to the point where he is prepared to listen to criticism. Such a person will find life-giving criticism in places where he can come into contact with wise people, for it is only wise people who are qualified to offer criticism in a truly constructive way.

Criticism is a form of intervention that Hashem provides to encourage us to improve the way we live our lives. A general discussion of this subject is offered in conjunction with Segment 15-10.

Learning Mishlei

(31) For an ear to hear — אֵזֶן שְׁמַעַת

life-giving criticism — תּוֹכַחַת חַיִּים

let it abide — תִּלְוֶן

in the midst of the wise — בְּקֶרֶב חֲכָמִים

The more time he spends in listening to wise people and observing them, the more opportunity he will have to improve his perspective of what life is all about.

Additional Insights

(1) Wisdom is by its very nature communicative. It needs to be communicated from parent to child and from teacher to student. This is a process that starts at the beginning of life and never ends. The primary instruments of communication are the mouth and the ear. Even the Written Torah cannot stand alone. It must be accompanied and explained by the spoken words of the Oral Torah. (רשר"ה)

(2) But hearing is not sufficient. Spoken wisdom must be accompanied by learning through vision, seeing how wise people conduct themselves in every situation. It takes a lifetime to absorb wisdom and a lifetime to share it. (מלבי"ם)