

Mishlei 15-33

Humility

Key Concepts

In creating man, Hashem made him superior to all other creatures. In so doing He presented man with a great challenge — not to let the sense of superiority go to his head. When a person feels superior, he may unthinkingly believe he is justified in treating other people badly. He may even fail to appreciate the debt of gratitude he owes his Creator and may feel justified in violating the laws of morality which the Creator has established as a condition for ultimate human survival.

Mishlei addresses this challenge and in a few short words presents a recipe for dealing with it. The key ingredient in this recipe is humility.

The sequence begins with *yiras Hashem*, the fear of G-d. This is the lesson taught to us by Avraham Avinu. If man fails to recognize his insignificance in the universe relatively to the one and only Universal Power, he cannot expect to find true humility in dealing with other people.

Once man learns to respect the power and the will of his Creator, he can begin to acquire the wisdom that Hashem has granted to mankind. That means he must learn to suppress his own desires and selfishness whenever they are in conflict with the laws of justice and kindness that are implied by Hashem's wisdom.

Man can then apply the lessons of unselfishness and humility to his dealings with other people. By giving another person the benefit of the doubt, he grows to love his fellow man and avoids the kinds of conflict that result in unethical behavior.

This sequence of steps in character development leads a person to the honor and respect of his family and fellow human beings. They see him as an unthreatening servant of Hashem who can be fully trusted to always do what is right. Thus, they are eager to treat him as a role model to guide their own way through life.

Exploring Mishlei

(לג) יִרְאַת ה' מוֹסֵר חֵכְמָה וְלִפְנֵי כְבוֹד עֲנָוָה :

Fear of Hashem is the discipline of wisdom, and humility precedes honor.

This proverb divides the development of humility into two parts. The first part begins with the fear of Hashem, which is described as a discipline that enables a person to acquire the wisdom of the Torah.

Once an individual has learned to see himself as a humble servant of Hashem, he is ready to apply that submissiveness to his relationships with other people. This attitude draws the goodwill of family and neighbors so that this worthy individual is loved and honored by all good people.

Learning Mishlei

**Fear of Hashem — יִרְאַת ה' —
is the discipline — מוֹסֵר —
that leads to wisdom — חֵכְמָה,
and humility precedes honor — וְלִפְנֵי כְבוֹד עֲנוּהָ.**

Additional Insights

(1) The fear of Hashem (*yiras Hashem*) is an important goal in its own right. It is also a means through which a person can develop the discipline needed to achieve wisdom. Similarly, the practice of humility is an important *middah* (character trait) in its own right. It is also a step that leads to honor and respect. (מצודות, מלבניים)

(2) The relationship between wisdom and *yiras Hashem* also works in reverse. Through the discipline inherent in wisdom a person can develop his character to achieve *Yiras Hashem*. But *Yiras Hashem* is the ultimate goal, as it says, "What does Hashem, your G-d, ask of you? Only to fear Hashem" (Devarim 10:12). Also it says in Avos (3, 17), "If there is no wisdom there is no *yirah*." (אבן יחיאל, רבינו יונה)

(3) Another meaning of **כְבוֹד** (honor) is perfection in the development of character. Such perfection is preceded by humility which is the most important of the *middos*. (המאירי)

(4) Before being worthy of receiving honor one must acknowledge his limitations in not achieving all his potential. Without this acknowledgment, honor will only add to self-delusion, as well as to one's deluding others. (דעת סופרים)

(5) Another view is that humility is even greater than *Yiras Hashem*. The fear of Hashem prepares us to reach humility, which is a stage in preparing a person for the eternal honor of the afterlife in the World to Come. Nevertheless, the Torah

constantly exhorts us to fear Hashem rather than teach us the ethics of humility. In other words, the Torah concentrates on the initial preparations from which the final goals ultimately develop. (אלשיך)