

Mishlei 16-17

Vigilance

Key Concepts

As discussed in Mishlei 11-10 the good people in a community may be described in terms of *Yashrus*. This is the quality of fair-minded and upright people (*Yesharim*) who are motivated by their deeply felt sense of right and wrong. A person may be fair-minded from birth or as a result of the way he was brought up.

In Mishlei 15-19 we have also seen that *Yesharim* are straightforward people who are responsible in their behavior. A responsible person sets worthy 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 resists distractions that interfere with his concentration. In contrast, 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.

Because the *Yesharim* are effective in overcoming obstacles, their course through life may be thought of as being a well-paved road. This is important because life's obstacles often consist of temptations introduced by the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination). No person is immune to the challenges of the *yetzer hara*, not even the *Yesharim* who are basically upright.

This means that *Yesharim* should not be satisfied with their sense of uprightness and fairmindedness. Beyond the quality of *Yashrus*, there is *Tzidkus*. This is the quality of righteous people (*Tzadikim*) who are motivated by their intense desire to please Hashem and their fear of offending Him. Of course, any one person is likely to have both *Tzidkus* and *Yashrus* in varying degrees.

This is where vigilance comes in. A person with a degree of *Tzidkus* will be concerned that he may inadvertently succumb to the temptation for sin and so he will want to exercise vigilance. This means he will take extra steps to guard against the evil forces that are always present in our lives through the efforts of the *yetzer hara* which never gives up.

Exploring Mishlei

(יז) מְסִלַת יְשָׁרִים סוֹר מִרָע שֹׁמֵר נַפְשׁוֹ נֹצֵר דַּרְכּוֹ:

(17) The paved path of resolutely upright people avoids evil;
but one who is concerned for his soul protects his way.

The first part of this proverb introduces us to the virtues of the *Yesharim*, showing that they are following a paved path, one which is not affected by obstacles, and which enables them to avoid evil.

The second part of the proverb reminds the *Yesharim* that they are not perfect. A person who is concerned for his soul, that is, for the relationship between his soul and his Creator, will not want to rely on all his good qualities of being one of the *Yesharim*. He will want to actively guard against the possibility of any temptations that his *yetzer hara* may try to foist upon him.

Learning Mishlei

(17) The course through life chosen by *Yesharim* — מְסִלַת יְשָׁרִים —
avoids the dangers of evil — סוֹר מִרָע

But the one concerned for his soul — שֹׁמֵר נַפְשׁוֹ —
actively protects his way — נֹצֵר דַּרְכּוֹ.

Additional Insights

(1) In the ideal case, a person who is a complete *Yashar* is one who faces no obstacles because he knows instinctively what is right and what is wrong. The path before him is completely paved. At the other extreme is a person whose path is full of obstacles because he is constantly beset by temptations. Based on the golden rule of the Rambam, a person should gradually adjust his approach to life, ultimately reaching a middle way that matches his particular stage of spiritual development at the time. (שבט מיהודה)

(2) A very intelligent person may feel so confident in his abilities that even if he misjudges an obstacle, he will be able to placate Hashem and extricate himself from any punishment. This is a foolish risk because some problems may prove unsolvable. Accordingly, even the smartest man should take precautions to guard his path so that he avoids sin. (רבינו יונה)