

Mishlei 16-19

Humility and Pride

Key Concepts

Humility and pride are contrasting qualities. They affect not only the individual's social behavior but his entire approach to life, especially the way he relates to wealth. Humble people try to maintain a low profile in terms of financial wealth because they do not wish to appear better than those with whom they associate. They do not wish to be an object of envy and, if forced to make a choice, would rather be seen as poor than rich.

In contrast, proud people are concerned about their financial status within the community. They measure status by the wealth that they are able to display. They want to feel that they are better than other people and so they put effort into accumulating and displaying sufficient wealth to justify this attitude. Unfortunately, the drive for wealth as an end in itself sometimes draws them into unlawful means for acquiring wealth.

Although Mishlei encourages the attitude of humility, he does not encourage poverty as an end in itself. On the contrary, the middle way is the optimum, and a person should seek to have sufficient assets to be able to support his family and serve Hashem with integrity. However, a prideful focus on acquiring wealth is to be avoided because of the harm that it does to the person's character and because of the temptation to act sinfully in acquiring it.

Exploring Mishlei

(יט) טוב שְׁפִל רוּחַ אֶת <עניים> עֲנוּיִם מִחֶלֶק שָׁלַל אֶת גְּאִים:
 (19) *It is better to be a humble spirit living among the poor than to live among the proud, sharing their ill-gotten spoils.*

This proverb contrasts humility with pride in their effect on a person's financial status. It is clearly desirable to be humble, but the proverb begins by stating that to achieve humility a person should even be willing to accept a life of poverty among others who are poor.

Although a person would not choose poverty as an end in itself, the value of humility is so great that a condition of poverty for a humble person is better than the alternative extreme of being part of a wealthy community of people who take pride in their wealth. The reason is that in their efforts to outdo each other they expose themselves to the risks of acquiring wealth through unlawful means. They also expose themselves to harm from vengeful competitors in that wealthy community.

Learning Mishlei

(19) **It is better to be a humble spirit** — טוב שְׁפַל רוּחַ
 living **among the poor** — אֶת עֲנִיִּים
than to be sharing the spoils of robbery — מִחֶלֶק שָׁלַל
 living **among the proud** — אֶת גִּבּוֹרִים.

Additional Insights

(1) The text uses alternate terms to refer to the people with whom the humble person should be prepared to associate. The written text (פְּתִיב) uses the word עֲנִיִּים meaning poor. The vocalized text (קָרִי) uses the word עֲנָוִים meaning humble. Generally, the vocalized text is used to carry the plain meaning, but in this case the written text carries the plain meaning. (הגר"א)

(2) Ordinarily a person should try to choose the middle way of humility (עֲנָוִים) rather than the extremes of abject humility (שְׁפַל רוּחַ) or pride (גִּבּוֹרִים). But, if necessary, the abject humility of poverty is preferable to pride. (שבט מיהודה)