

Mishlei 16-22

Wisdom–Intellect

Key Concepts

The heart is that part of the human personality which is the seat of human emotion. It is the driving force that impels a person to take action. However, the emotions are not the best judge of what is right and wrong, either from the aspect of physical survival or morality. For this reason, the human heart is designed to be subject to the rational discipline of the intellect (*seichel*).

An animal can survive without *seichel* because its natural instincts are structured for self-preservation. However, man was created with instincts and emotions that need to be managed by his intellect. The intellect is guided by the wisdom that the person has acquired through experience or training. That wisdom will help him make the right choices in life.

The intellect is the ultimate arbiter as to whether the person considers it right or wrong to perform a specific act. The intellect studies the options that are available in any situation and tries to make a rational evaluation as to which is the wisest choice based on the standards and principles of the person's accumulated wisdom. The intellect cannot be effective in its role unless the person allows it to dominate the heart and its emotions while still being able to respond to the emotional dimension of human existence.

The discerning thinker allows his intellect to be properly developed as described in the previous segment (16-21). He then employs his intellect to dominate and train his heart so that it is guided by his wisdom. Such a person is a *chacham lev* (Segment 10-08). He will find that his intellect is the key to a meaningful life in the service of his Creator as long as it is actively employed.

But the person who neglects his intellect is in danger of making unwise decisions that jeopardize his soul. Such a foolish person is unable to maintain an effective regimen of self-discipline. Any attempt at self-discipline by a fool is doomed to failure.

Exploring Mishlei

(כב) מְקוֹר חַיִּים שֶׁכֶּל בְּעַלְיוֹ וּמוֹסַר אֲוִלִים אֶזְלָת:

*The intellect is the source of life to its master;
but the self-discipline of fools is foolishness.*

This proverb compares the wise person, who makes effective use of his intellect, with the foolish person, who neglects his intellect. The wise person gives his intellect the authority to be the master of his heart. That means his intellect is able to impose the necessary self-discipline so that his heart receives the proper guidance to do what is right.

For the foolish person, his intellect lacks direction since it does not have access to a consistent store of wisdom. It is then unable to impose the proper self-discipline upon his heart and whatever uninformed self-discipline he attempts will have uncertain results.

Learning Mishlei

(22) **The intellect is a source of life — מְקוֹר חַיִּים שֶׁכֶּל.**

to its master — בְּעַלְיוֹ

because he uses it to make a rational analysis
to guide his heart, based upon his wisdom.

But the self-discipline of fools — וּמוֹסַר אֲוִלִים

is foolishness — אֶזְלָת

because his judgment has become corrupted
by a lack of wisdom.

Additional Insight

(1) The word **שֶׁכֶּל** is related to the word **הִסְתַּכְּלוּת**, looking intently, which corresponds to the function of the intellect to closely examine the options involved before making a decision. The fool does not use his intellect and therefore depends upon his previous mistakes to tell him whether a proposed action is a mistake. (רלב"ג)

(2) The person who does not use his intellect is not able to make an independent decision and so he depends upon others for advice and guidance. If the *mussar* guidance is not available, he is left this own uninformed judgment. (שבט מיהודה)

(3) The proverb says that the **מוֹסֵר** of fools is foolishness. This is because they have allowed their judgment to be distorted by an immoral lifestyle that came about because of foolish decisions of the past. (רבינו יונה)

(4) Another reason that the **מוֹסֵר** of fools is foolishness is because they think it wise to avoid asking for advice. This attitude is foolish because a fool can learn from wise people only if he is not ashamed to ask. (המאירי)

(5) The **מוֹסֵר** of fools may also refer to the suffering that fools experience because of their sins. This necessary discipline happens to them because of their own foolishness. (הגר"א)