

Mishlei 16-25

Wisdom – Discernment

[Pesukim 16:25 and 16:26]

Key Concepts

When a person is faced with choices, he is naturally tempted to follow the path of least resistance, the path which seems easiest to follow. Even if that path is destined to cause him great unhappiness, he may be inclined to choose it because of his appetite for immediate physical comfort and his reluctance to deal with the demands of his conscience. He makes that bad choice because he deludes himself into thinking that if something looks good it must be good.

Mishlei presents the two choices in stark terms, referring to the easy one as the single straight road and the more complicated one as the multiple roads of death. The straight road seems smooth and easy to follow. Initially, there is a delusion that it is the only logical choice. However, if he would stop and think a bit more about it, he would realize how many calamitous destinations it can lead to.

Exploring Mishlei

This segment consists of two proverbs which are linked together to form a complete thought.

The first proverb has already been presented independently in Segment 14-12 (Wisdom-Discernment). The perspective there was simply to recognize the consequences of an intellectual decision (the two choices).

In an unusual step, Mishlei repeats that proverb here to serve as a preamble to the second proverb, which relates a person's decision to the conflict between his body and soul.

In the second proverb Mishlei warns against improper burdening of the soul by forcing it to accept the appetites of the body. All of this can come about because a person is tempted to delude himself into keeping the body comfortable and satisfying it with earthly pleasures.

(כה) יש דרך ישר לפני איש ואחריתה דרכי מות:

(25) There is a straight road before a man, but at its end are roads of death.

(כו) נפש עמל עמלה לו כי אכף עליו פיהו:

(26) That is what happens if *his toiling soul is toiling for his physical comfort because his appetite is pushing him.*

Learning Mishlei

(25) There is a straight road — יש דרך ישר —
before a man — לפני איש —

and he is glad to follow it, expecting a good outcome,
but he should ask himself whether the current road leads
to other roads that are dangerously twisted, so that
at its end are the roads of death — ואחריתה דרכי מות.

Discernment involves thoughtful differentiation between similar options. It is related to the quality of shrewdness which involves awareness of what may reasonably be expected to happen under present conditions and how conditions are likely to change, depending on the choices he now makes.

(26) If his **toiling soul — נפש עמל,**
instead of toiling in learning Torah,
toils for him (his physical comfort) — **עמלה לו,**
he will come to a tragic end
because — כי
his mouth (his appetite for ease) — **פיהו**
is compelling him — אכף עליו.

Additional Insight

(1) The expression **עמלה לו** suggests that the soul has been toiling for it (the body) to give it physical comfort, as opposed to the proverb in Segment 16-24 which speaks of the **אמרי נעם**, the words of pleasantness that give sweetness to the soul. (רבינו יונה)

(2) An alternate interpretation of **עמלה לו** is that his **נפש** has selfishly learned Torah for itself only. That doesn't count as learning *lishmah* (for its own sake) because he has covered his mouth — **כי אכף עליו פיהו** — instead of teaching his Torah wisdom to others. (בינה ליעתים)

(3) Another interpretation takes an opposite point of view and sees the verse describing how the **נֶפֶשׁ** benefits from its own toil (**עֲמָלָהּ לוֹ**) if the mouth submits to it (**כִּי אָכַף עָלָיו פִּיהוּ**). According to that interpretation the two proverbs are unlinked.
(רלב"ג)