

Mishlei 17-02

Inheritance

Key Concepts

A person's station in life is strongly influenced by his beginnings. If he was born to a family of wealth, culture, and achievement he has a powerful head start. However, he is at risk of believing that he has an inherent right to the advantages with which he was born. This natural assumption of entitlement can lead him to assume he is better than other people and that he can coast through life. He may think he does not need to exert himself as much as those who do not have his advantages.

On the other hand, a person who comes from a humble background is often motivated to resist complacency. If he develops the right attitude he can work hard and apply himself to his studies. Then, if Hashem wills it, he may ultimately rise to great achievements and a station in life that far exceeds those who were born "with a silver spoon in their mouth."

Nobody chooses his origins. These are determined by his Creator. It is up to each person to develop the kind of attitude that will enable him to effectively utilize the tools he has been given. He can then live a meaningful life, a life of worthwhile achievement.

Exploring Mishlei

(ב) עֶבֶד מְשָׁפִיל יְמֹטֵל בְּבֵן מִבֵּיט וּבְתוֹךְ אֲחִים יַחְלֵק נַחֲלָה :

(2) *An intelligent servant rules over a shameful son,
and takes a share of the inheritance among the brothers.*

To illustrate the challenge of overcoming a sense of entitlement, Mishlei presents us with an example which we can easily visualize. Imagine a successful family business being operated by a number of sons. Each of the sons looks forward to getting his "piece of the pie" after the demise of the father who founded the business.

Unfortunately, not all of the sons are pulling their weight because of complacency and a sense of entitlement. It therefore become necessary to bring in outside help

to perform key functions. One of the “hired hands” puts in long hours to master the fine points of the business and the success of the business comes to depend upon that individual.

Even though the sons see this individual as a mere “servant” he ultimately rises to a senior management position and is given a corresponding equity interest in the business.

Another proverb concerned with overcoming complacency may be found in Segment 14-14. This deals with a person who is comfortable with mediocrity. Such a person will not be able to grow in character and wisdom.

Learning Mishlei

(2) Despite his humble origins **an intelligent servant** — עֶבֶד מִשְׁכָּל —
ultimately **rules over a shameful son** — יִמְשַׁל בְּבֶן מִבֵּישׁ —
and among the brothers — וּבְתוֹךְ אֲחָיִם —
takes a share of the inheritance. — יִחַלֵּק נַחֲלָה —

Additional Insights

[1] The idea of personal merit overcoming the advantages of inherited status applies to many situations. For example, a righteous convert to Judaism (*Ger Tzedek*) is considered superior to an unworthy born Jew even though great advantages of tradition are associated with being able to trace one’s lineage to previous generations. (רש"י)

[2] In business, the qualities that are most important are initiative and hard work. These qualities are superior to being a son of the boss. (מלבי"ם).

[3] A father has a duty to train his son in the qualities that are needed to succeed in his business. It is a mistake to pamper the son and assume that he will learn what he needs to know after the father is gone. (רבינו יונה)

[4] A person should not trust in inherited distinction. Distinction that does not originate from within himself is ultimately valueless. (מאירי)

[5] A person should not trust in inherited wealth. Without intelligence and management skills wealth will not last long. (מאירי)

In this proverb Mishlei uses the word **פֶּת** to refer to bread instead of the more common word **לֶחֶם**. This is because **פֶּת** suggests a broken piece of bread rather than a whole loaf. Thus, a person should satisfy himself with bread in minimal form if that is the price of tranquility. (מלבי"ם, מצודות)

[2] Imagined success is not true success. True success is that which brings happiness, that is, inner peace. (מלבי"ם)

If a person can have possessions that are not in contention he should seek to satisfy himself with them and forego possessions upon which others have a claim. (רבינו יונה)

[4] A person's desire to enlarge his possessions can even extend to his learning, and there can be a downside here. It would be a mistake to cover more ground in his learning just to be able to boast about how many pages he has covered. Instead, he should make sure to review and understand what he has learned before moving on to new material. (הגר"א)