

Mishlei 17-05

Speech – Insensitivity

Key Concepts

You reveal a lot about yourself by the way you react to the misfortune of another person. For example, you might identify with him, thinking that what has happened to him could just as easily have happened to you. After all, what has happened to him is clearly the will of Hashem.

But what if your instinct is to distinguish yourself from the unfortunate individual? You might think that he has only himself to blame. You might think, "I would never let such a thing happen to me because I am smarter than he is, and I am more energetic than he is."

That kind of thinking is the mark of a selfish, conceited person. It is not a good attitude to have. But what is even worse is the attitude of someone who speaks disparagingly of the unfortunate individual or laughs at him. By behaving that way, he is revealing his own insecurity. He is so afraid that he could also be a victim of misfortune that he tries to put the other person in a different category whereby he deserves what has happened to him.

If a person allows such a bad attitude to affect his behavior he is committing a grave sin because he is showing disrespect to Hashem. He is implying that the fate of a person is not in the hands of the Creator and that someone who has enough intelligence and who is ready to work hard can control his own destiny regardless of the will of Hashem.

Exploring Mishlei

(ה) לַעֲגַל לְרֵשׁ חֲרֹף עֲשָׂהוּ שְׂמֵחַ לְאִיד לֹא יִנְקָה :

(5) **He who scorns a poor man offends his Maker;**

he who is happy over another man's misfortune will not go unpunished.

This proverb compares the person whose insensitivity is revealed in his behavior with the one who keeps his sinful thoughts to himself. In the first part of the proverb, we see that the act of openly scorning a poor man is a clear offense to the Creator beside the fact that he is committing an act of cruelty to an unfortunate human being.

The second part of the proverb addresses the person who keeps his thoughts to himself. He is not acting cruelly to another human being, but he disregards the fact that Hashem knows his thoughts. And so, he should not expect to get away with his disrespectful attitude even though he has not put it into words. This is an issue that is addressed by Mishlei in segment 17-03 (Privacy).

He can compound the offense by actually taking pleasure in someone else's misfortune. He is so relieved that he himself is not a victim to the misfortune that he is pleased upon hearing the bad news.

We find a related concept in segment 14:31: **עֲשֵׂק דָּל חֲרֹף עֲשֵׂהוּ**, "*One who exploits the poor man offends his Maker*". This proverb reflects the fact that the wealth of the rich was given to them partly in order to help the poor, and if the rich neglect this duty, they are effectively questioning the justice and wisdom of Creation.

Learning Mishlei

(5) **He who scorns a poor man – לעג לְרֵשׁ**

causes suffering to that individual and
offends Hashem his Maker – חֲרֹף עֲשֵׂהוּ.

He who is happy over another man's misfortune – שִׂמַח לְאִיד
will not go unpunished – לֹא יִנָּקָה

even though he does not put his thoughts into words.

Additional Insights

[1] By mocking a poor person, he is actually criticizing Hashem for making that person poor. (רלב"ג)

[2] By mocking a poor person, he is demonstrating his conceited belief that he can mistreat the poor person without fear of retribution. (חבל נחלה)

[3] When a person finds joy in the misfortune of another, he demonstrates that he is not afraid that such a fate might befall him. (מאירי)

[4] A person who takes joy in the misfortune of another is acting as though Hashem is his personal agent to punish the other person. He could also be indirectly exacting vengeance for an insult that he himself suffered, and this too is a sin. (שבט מיהודה)

[5] The misfortune of another person could be financial, but it could also be a health issue. It could also be a reference to Torah knowledge. A person should not ridicule anyone who has forgotten his learning. (הגר"א)