

Mishlei 17-07

Status – Nobility

Key Concepts

When an unaccomplished person acts with foolish self-importance, he is likely to give himself away by his pompous, lofty manner of speaking. His choice of language brands him as a faker. If he pretends to be a generous giver to worthy causes people will see through his pretentiousness. Even if he makes a large pledge to charity, he will not be believed.

But what if he is a true man of distinction, the same high-flown choice of words may be quite appropriate, and people will give him the benefit of the doubt. For such a person to arouse suspicion he would have to go far beyond pompous language or an extravagant pledge. It is only when he speaks a language of obvious lies and deception that people will begin to realize with whom they are dealing.

Exploring Mishlei

(ז) לֹא נְאוּה לְנִבֵּל שְׂפַת יִתְר אֶף כִּי לְנֹדִיב שְׂפַת שְׂקָר :

(7) *Grandiloquent speech is unfitting in an unworthy person but may be fitting for a man of nobility. It is only lying speech that would be similarly unfitting in a man of nobility.*

This proverb identifies the kind of grandiloquent speech that is appropriate to a man of nobility but would be recognized as being inappropriate to an unworthy scoundrel. A man of nobility with a reputation as a philanthropist would have to go far beyond grandiloquent choice of words to be challenged. He would have to stoop to lies and deception.

The proverb teaches that a person should realize how the way he speaks will affect the opinion that others have of him. To be believable, his language should be suited to his behavior.

Learning Mishlei

(7) It is **out of place** — לֹא נְאוּה —
for an unworthy person — לְנִבֵּל —
 to use **grandiloquent speech** — שְׂפַת יִתְר

But for a man of nobility – אַף כִּי לְנָדִיב –
 only **lying speech – שְׁפַת שְׁקֵר**
 would be similarly unfitting.

Additional Insights

[1] In an alternate interpretation of the proverb, an unworthy person would feel uncomfortable using grandiloquent speech because it is too lofty for him. To even a greater extent, a man of nobility would detest lying speech. (מצודות)

[2] In another alternate interpretation of the proverb it is referring to how people react to the words from the lips (שְׁפַת) of others. The unworthy person resists guidance that would elevate him (שְׁפַת יִתָּר). The man of nobility is pleased with such advice, but he would resist deceptive speech (שְׁפַת שְׁקֵר). (אבן עזרא)

[3] In another alternate interpretation of the proverb, the נָבֵל is miserly and avoids generous commitments to charity (שְׁפַת יִתָּר), but when he does make such a commitment, he needs to be careful to keep his promise. All the more, a generous man (נָדִיב), who is likely to make such a commitment needs to be careful to keep it so that it is not a false commitment (שְׁפַת שְׁקֵר). (מלבים)

[4] In another alternate interpretation of the proverb, the נָבֵל is miserly with regard to his wisdom and avoids sharing it. Therefore, wisdom is not appropriate for him (לֹא נֶאֱוָה), because he does not deserve it. In contrast, a נָדִיב is generous with his wisdom, but needs to avoid distorting what he shares (שְׁפַת שְׁקֵר). (מאירי)

[5] In another alternate interpretation of the proverb, the miserly נָבֵל avoids the generous commitments (שְׁפַת יִתָּר) that he is being asked to make, but if he gives in and plays the role of a philanthropist (נָדִיב) he fails to follow through and thus it becomes a false commitment (שְׁפַת שְׁקֵר). Therefore, it is a mistake to try to get the נָבֵל to make such a commitment. (חנוך לנער)