

Mishlei 17-08

Influence – Bribe

Key Concepts

It is possible to influence someone else's behavior by means of a gift, gratuity, or bribe. Depending on the circumstances, such an offering may serve a noble purpose or a harmful purpose. The offering may be in the form of money, an article of value, or even just words. The effect of an illegal offering may be to corrupt a judge or a witness. On the other hand, an offering may serve to promote forgiveness or goodwill.

Mishlei wants to make us aware of the power in a gift, both for good, or ill. The proverb in this segment is structured so as to make us aware of this.

Exploring Mishlei

(ח) אָבֹן חֵן הַשָּׁחַד בְּעֵינַי בְּעֵלְיוֹ אֵל כָּל אֲשֶׁר יִפְנֶה יִשְׁכִּיל:

*To its "owner", a bribe is like a charming gem;
wherever he turns he will succeed.*

This proverb speaks of the influence that can be gained by one who offers a gift. It speaks of such a gift using the word **שָׁחַד**, bribe. Although this word typically has a negative connotation, it can also have a positive connotation in its literary form as we shall see.

There are generally two parties involved in the giving of a bribe, the one who gives it and the one who receives it. Mishlei uses the ambiguous term "owner", which can be interpreted either way.

The benefit inherent in a bribe is often more than its monetary value. The awareness of who gave the bribe and the circumstances in which it was given have a direct effect on its power. Mishlei describes a bribe as an **אָבֹן חֵן**, charming gem, implying that the bribe has an almost magical power in its effect.

Each of the participants in a bribe transaction needs to think about the power of what is being given. For example, if the giver is a party in a court proceeding and the receiver is a judge, then the giver may hope to gain a falsified distortion of whatever may come up. That is, **אֵל כָּל אֲשֶׁר יִפְנֶה יִשְׁכִּיל** "wherever he turns, he

will succeed.” Under the influence of a bribe, a judge may be expected to interpret every piece of evidence as supporting the case of the one who gave him the bribe.

From the point of view of the giver of the bribe, he may no longer need to prepare seriously for his appearance in court. He feels like a person wearing a charming jewel which must win him favor with everyone. The bribe is certain to decide the judge’s verdict. And so, he believes that he will surely succeed.

But there is another dimension to a bribe. A bribe leads a person in a position of trust such as a judge or witness to violate his trust. So, we see that the victim is effectively a third party to the bribe. Clearly any person in a position of trust, such as a trusted employee, accountant, or financial adviser may find himself with a conflict of interest where he gains a benefit at the expense of the one who depends on him. The victim is unaware that his trusted employee stands to gain from his unrevealed involvement in the activity. That hidden benefit may also be thought of as a “charming gem” because it so fascinates the trusted person and blinds him to the serious ethical lapse in his behavior.

Learning Mishlei

(8) **A charming gem – אָבֹן חֵן**
is the bribe – הַשְּׁחָד

in the eyes of its owner – בְּעֵינֵי בְּעָלָיו

that is, to the one who benefits from the transaction.

Wherever he turns – אֶל כָּל אֲשֶׁר יִפְּנֶה
he hopes that he will succeed – יִשְׁכֵּל

because he has inserted a hidden factor into the dynamics of the relationship.

Additional Insights

[1] The term **שְׁחָד** in the sense of an offering that is given to influence behavior can also have a positive connotation when the offering is an act of devotion, such as when a person begs Hashem to forgive his sins. His words of contrition are then referred to as **שְׁחָד**. (רש"י)

[2] A person who accepts a bribe at the expense of an innocent party may feel guilty at first, but he soon comes to feel comfortable with his financial benefit. This is because to him it is like a “charming gem.” (רבינו יונה)

[3] The person who receives an unethical financial benefit is so pleased with it that he uses his ingenuity to justify it to himself. This use of his intelligence for an unworthy end explains why it is described with the word **יִשְׁפִּיל**, which is related to **שִׁפְּל**, "intelligence". (רבינו יונה)

[4] Bribery of a judge is so repugnant that it should never be used, even to achieve a true verdict. (חנוך לינער)