

Mishlei 17-12

Wisdom – Fear

Key Concepts

Even the smallest living creature is able to recognize the presence of danger. In reaction to its sense of danger, the creature triggers some kind of defense mechanism that enables it to evade or overcome the danger threatening its survival.

For the simplest creatures, such as insects and fish, the sensing of danger and the reaction to it are likely to be completely instinctive. No significant thought process is involved.

However, for man and for many animals, a creature that senses danger is able to evaluate the degree of danger to some degree and determine how to react. This evaluation and the resultant action are driven by the emotion of fear.

For many kinds of danger, fear is instinctive but the creature can still decide whether or not to act, depending on how much of a threat it appears to be. However, some threats are at such a low level that there is no instinctive sense of fear.

For example, people who smoke cigarettes know that the damage caused by one cigarette is negligible. So they don't feel fear when considering whether to light up. And yet, when a person thinks about the long-term threat of a painful death that can result from a habit of smoking, this knowledge can activate fear. If that fear is strong enough the person will actually stop smoking.

To feel significant fear, the individual must believe that the threat facing him is real and that the probability of the feared event is high. This is a matter of judgment and that judgment is affected by the temptations, such as the pleasures of smoking, motivating the individual to disregard or suppress the incipient fear.

When a person commits a crime, he will feel fear to the extent that he believes he may be found out and that he will have to pay for his crime. If he commits a sin against the will of his Creator he will feel fear to the extent that he believes he will have to give an accounting of what he has been doing with his life. This kind of fear is not instinctive. It depends upon his level of intellectual development. As his

awareness of the spiritual nature of existence grows, his ability to sense fear of spiritual failure grows accordingly.

There are people who object to fear as a motivating force in human affairs. They tend to be skeptical about the possibility of ever having to give an accounting of themselves. Mishlei describes them as fools and warns the rest of us not to be misled by their misguided attitude. Mishei teaches us to appreciate the value of fear because it helps us maintain spiritual truth and goodness in our lives.

Exploring Mishlei

(יב) פְּגוּשׁ דָּב שׁכּוֹל בְּאִישׁ וְאֵל כְּסִיל בְּאִוְלָתוֹ:

(12) **Encountering a bereaved bear is safer for a man than encountering a fool in his foolishness.**

This proverb alerts us to the threat of spiritual danger that is inherent in any encounter with a fool who scoffs at the idea of fear. Even though spiritual fear depends on the conscience of the believer in the truth of the Torah, it should be even greater than instinctive fear.

As an example of instinctive fear, the proverb speaks of what a man would feel when encountering a wild bear who has become enraged by the slaughter of its cubs. We can easily visualize how frightening such an experience would be. Nevertheless, Mishlei suggests that for a thinking person (אִישׁ) the fear of spiritual harm that can come about through an encounter with a skeptical fool should be even greater.

Learning Mishlei

(12) **Encountering a bereaved bear — פְּגוּשׁ דָּב שׁכּוֹל —**
is safer **for a man** of developed conscience — **בְּאִישׁ,**
than meeting **a fool — וְאֵל כְּסִיל —**
in his foolishness — בְּאִוְלָתוֹ.

Additional Insights

[1] Just as a person should avoid starting up with a wild animal, he should avoid getting into a dispute with a skeptical fool. (רבינו יונה)

[2] For a conscientious man a wild bear is less dangerous than a skeptical fool because the man has the benefit of greater intelligence whereas the fool will use devious arguments to get the advantage in any dispute. (אבן יחיאל)

[3] It is more dangerous for a man to confront a bereaved bear than for a fool to confront his own foolishness for the fool is at risk of losing his share in the World to Come. (שבט מיהודה)