

Mishlei 17-14

Conflict

Key Concepts

In every situation where people interact there is a potential for conflict. Either party may be at fault in whole or in part, but no matter how it started, every conflict has the potential to take on a life of its own. There is a dynamic energy in a conflict that may even cause it to continue far beyond the circumstances in which it originated and far beyond the original thoughts of the participants.

Because of its distinctive nature a conflict is often compared to a fire that spreads rapidly under the right conditions and continues to cause damage until it finally burns itself out. Fire is a good metaphor for a conflict because its heat corresponds to the heated tempers that often fuel an argument.

But a conflict may also take on the character of a small water leak that can appear innocuously in a dam. If the leak is not repaired the flow of water gradually gets bigger until it becomes a torrential stream. The churning waters may ultimately flood acres of land and inundate cities.

Mishlei uses the metaphor of water to emphasize that conflict does not necessarily require heat and can expand over long periods of time, quietly causing damage to the basic infrastructure of a family or community.

Exploring Mishlei

(יד) פוטר מים ראשית מדון ולפני התגלע הריב נטוש:

**(14) The beginning of a quarrel is like leaking water;
before the conflict is publicized, abandon it!**

This proverb compares a quarrel to leaking water. No matter who is at fault, all parties to the conflict and all the people in their neighborhood are likely to suffer if it is not managed.

Mishlei identifies a major turning point in the life of a conflict. That is when the parties have taken a public position which they have openly argued and defended. This means they have invested their reputation in a particular point of view. It then becomes much more difficult for them to back down. Some damage has already been

done and it is on track to continue. That is why Mishlei urges anyone involved in a conflict to abandon it before it becomes unstoppable.

As a conflict progresses the parties will notice that they are passing a series of other turning points marked by thoughtless words or careless deeds. If they are aware of what is happening, they will act to control the spread of the conflict before further damage is done.

Why don't people act as they should when it is in their own self-interest to bring a conflict to an end? There is an inherent element of obstinacy which makes people believe they owe it to themselves to hold fast to whatever position they have taken, and not to give in, no matter what. Mishlei advises them to abandon their argument, even when they know they are right.

Such forbearance is not easy. But Mishlei advises that it is a good thing to do even if it means forgoing a rightful claim. The ultimate Judge of right and wrong is the Creator. He has taught us the importance of ending conflict and He can be trusted to redress all wrongs.

Learning Mishlei

(14) **The beginning of a quarrel — ראשית מִדוֹן**
is like **water leaking** from a dam — **פוֹטֵר מִיָּם**.
Before the conflict is publicized — וְלִפְנֵי הַתְּגַלֵּעַ
abandon it — וְנָטוּשׁ!

Additional Insights

[1] Peace and harmony are values to which we should be prepared to subordinate and sacrifice everything - except duty and conscience. (רשרייה)

[2] No matter what the cause of conflict may be, the conscientious person should work to gain self-control, forgiving inflicted injustice and, what is even more difficult, admitting his own mistakes and asking forgiveness. (רשרייה)

[3] Based on this proverb, the Gemara (Sanhedrin 6b) teaches that it is appropriate for a judge to try to make peace between opposing parties in the early stages of a case. But once he has reached his verdict, it would be unjust to try to urge a compromise. (מלבי"ם)