

Mishlei 17-16

Illusions

Key Concepts

As we have seen, a major theme of Mishlei is to teach people to appreciate Torah wisdom and to encourage them to do what they can to acquire that wisdom. But Mishlei now advises the reader that if he want to embark on the road to learning he should first think of his personal qualities as a human being. Despite all the time and effort that he is prepared to spend, he won't truly succeed if he is under the illusion that he himself won't need to change.

Mishlei teaches us that a person is a fool if he thinks his investment assures him the promise of Torah wisdom. What he also needs to do is to evaluate himself. He will not succeed until he makes of himself a vessel that is capable of receiving Torah wisdom.

This means the full realization that Torah wisdom is a gift from the Creator. It is granted only to those who approach it with the right attitude and the right qualities of moral and spiritual character.

Exploring Mishlei

(טז) לָמָּה זֶה מַחִיר בְּיַד כְּסִיל לְקִנּוֹת חֲכָמָה וְלֵב אֵין :

(16) **Why is there money in the hand of a fool to buy wisdom,
though he lacks heart?**

This proverb expresses amazement at the folly of someone who thinks he can acquire Torah wisdom despite lacking the essential qualifications. Although he says he is prepared to pay the price of wisdom, he still cannot buy it.

That is because he thinks of learning as simply a matter of time and effort. But all the time and effort that he is prepared to expend is not enough if he is unworthy.

So, the proverb asks what this investment is doing in his hand. The proverb tells him that he will be turned away because he lacks heart. What is heart? It is a quality of moral and spiritual character, which is the subject of this sacred book of Mishlei.

Some of the aspects of moral character that are especially relevant for one who wishes to acquire Torah wisdom are mentioned below under Additional Insights.

Learning Mishlei

(16) **Why is there money — לָמָּה זֶה מְחִיר**
in the hand of a fool — בְּיַד פֶּסִיל
to buy wisdom — לְקִנּוֹת חָכְמָה
 though he is **without heart — וְלֵב אֵין**

Just because the fool is prepared to pay the price of his time and effort, he will still not be able to acquire wisdom. He does not realize that he needs to develop his character as well.

Additional Insights

[1] To acquire Torah a person must have the intent of actually observing the *mitzvos* that he learns. (רש"י)

[2] If he lacks the desire to learn he will be unsuccessful. (אבן עזרא)

[3] Torah is an intellectual study. A person needs to have the patience and ability to think in terms of concepts and their relationships. (מצודות)

[4] To acquire Torah wisdom a person needs to have moral and spiritual strengths such as humility, kindness, and respect. (רבינו יונה)

[5] A person who is so pleased with himself that he thinks he already knows what is important will be unable to learn the Torah. (רש"י)

[6] If he has not mastered the ability to control his cravings and desires, he will be unable to learn Torah. (מלבי"ם)

[7] A person who seeks to learn Torah but lacks the fear of Hashem, will fail in his quest. (יומא עב:)