

Mishlei 17-23

Corruption

Key Concepts

Bribery has been a human weakness throughout the ages. The person seeking to gain unfair advantage by giving a gift to a judge or other officeholder surely deserves to be condemned.

But even more deserving of censure are those who violate a position of trust by accepting bribes. Through their greed they create a system of corruption which tempts the unwise into sinful behavior and poisons the entire legal system that is the foundation of civilized society.

The lessons of this proverb apply not only to judges in the courts but also to any employee who has been given responsibility for conducting business, such as buying or selling for the benefit of a firm. Wherever, people are being relied upon for using their judgment and discretion, there exists the possibility of corruption.

Exploring Mishlei

(כג) שֶׁחַד מִחֵיק רָשָׁע יִקַּח לְהַטּוֹת אֲרָחוֹת מִשְׁפָּט:

An evildoer accepts a bribe stealthily to pervert the paths of justice.

This proverb speaks of the person that accepts bribes as a **רָשָׁע** (evildoer) who perverts the **אֲרָחוֹת מִשְׁפָּט** (paths of justice). He thinks of himself as merely committing an isolated crime, a favor for the benefit of one person, but what he is doing has much broader implications because it sabotages the faith that people have in the court system. It is as if his purpose is to undermine the foundation of justice.

The corrupt judge knows he can succeed only if his selfish behavior is hidden from the world. This means he must act stealthily, as symbolized by taking his bribe from the inner pocket, the bosom (**חֵיק**), of the one he has tempted.

The concept of bribery is also explored in Segment 17-08. However, in that case Mishlei reminds us that the giving of a gift may serve a noble purpose or a harmful purpose depending on the circumstances.

Learning Mishlei

(כג) שחַד מִחִיק רָשָׁע יִקַּח
לְהַטּוֹת אַרְחוֹת מְשֻׁפָּט:

An evildoer accepts a bribe stealthily – שחַד מִחִיק רָשָׁע יִקַּח – effectively acting to pervert the paths of justice – לְהַטּוֹת אַרְחוֹת מְשֻׁפָּט.

Additional Insights

(1) In an alternate interpretation, the corrupt judge may sound out the two parties in a case to see which one is amenable to paying a bribe. This is likely to be the **רָשָׁע** who is undeserving and knows his case is weak. Therefore the corrupt judge takes his bribe **מִחִיק רָשָׁע**, from the bosom of that **רָשָׁע**. The other party, who is confident in the validity of his case is less likely to succumb to temptation. He believes that he will win on the merits of his claim without the need to offer a bribe. However, if the system has been corrupted, he will lose. (אבן יחיאל)

(2) The corrupt judge may ease his conscience by suggesting that the party with a good case should pay a bribe anyway to ensure his deserved victory. (הגר"א)

(3) In another interpretation, the judge may not be totally corrupt and the limit of his intervention is merely to facilitate the presentation of one party's case. He perverts the path of justice without falsifying the actual verdict. However, this is also corrupt behavior. (דעת סופרים)