

## Mishlei 18-06

# Belligerence

### Key Concepts

There are people who enter any verbal exchange in an argumentative or confrontational tone. They think their aggressive attitude protects them from being taken advantage of. Such people are especially afraid of being considered soft or weak. They use their mastery of language to put other people at a disadvantage and they think they will thereby succeed in any test of wills.

Inevitably the aggressive individuals invite defensive or reactive attitudes on the part of the people they talk to. As a result, quarrels ensue which result in painful confrontations with everyone involved losing out.

The individuals that instigate quarrels are referred to as fools because instead of gaining advantage from their aggressiveness, they end up suffering physical or emotional injury.

### Exploring Mishlei

(ו) שְׁפָתַי כְּסִיל יָבֵאוּ בְרִיב וּפִי לְמַהֲלָמוֹת יִקְרָא:

*The lips of a fool [are quick to] begin a quarrel, and his mouth cries out [in pain] at the blows [he receives].*

(ז) פִּי כְּסִיל מַחֲתָה לוֹ וּשְׁפָתָיו מוֹקֵשׁ נַפְשׁוֹ:

*A fool's mouth brings a calamity upon himself,  
but his lips are the trap for his soul.*

The consequences of an aggressive attitude are demonstrated with two related proverbs. In both cases when the faculty of speech is used to begin a quarrel it is symbolized by the lips, the external organ of speech. In the first proverb the lips unthinkingly start a quarrel the way a person comes into a room unaware of what has been happening there and without considering the dangers of potential strife.

In contrast, the mouth symbolizes the more thoughtful aspect of speech. This is the organ that recognizes and expresses the consequences of the fool's belligerence. In the first proverb it cries out in pain or complaint when the argument turns against the one who instigated it, either unwittingly or intentionally.

In the second proverb the mouth is held to account as the owner of the act of speech. The mouth is shown that it must take responsibility for the calamity that the thoughtless lips have brought about. In effect, the lips were a trap for the soul because the instigator has now been caught up in a sinful quarrel.

## Learning Mishlei

(6) **The lips of a fool — שִׁפְתֵי כָסִיל**  
 are quick to **begin a quarrel — יבאו בְּרִיב**  
**and his mouth — וּפִיו**  
**cries out in pain at the resulting blows — לְמַהֲלָמוֹת יִקְרָא**

(7) **A fool's mouth — פִּי כָסִיל**  
 brings a **calamity** upon **himself — מִחֲתָה לוֹ**  
**but his lips — וּשְׁפָתָיו**  
 are the **trap for his soul — מוֹקֵשׁ נַפְשׁוֹ**  
 for they instigated the quarrel through their contentious attitude.

## Additional Insights

(1) Mishlei is commenting on the tendency of some people to raise their voice when they want to make a point or win an argument. By raising their voice they hope to shout down their adversaries and discourage listeners from taking an opposing view. This aggressive stance is in contrast with the attitude of a wise man who speaks calmly and relies on wisdom to make his point. Unfortunately, a person who is shouted at is likely to shout back, leading to strife and calamity. (רבינו יונה)

(2) Another interpretation of לְמַהֲלָמוֹת יִקְרָא is “he calls for blows,” to bring them upon himself. In effect, his aggressive behavior invites a forceful reaction, which is the opposite of what he was expecting. (רש"י)

(3) In an alternate interpretation, a fool quietly begins a quarrel by discreetly whispering with his lips so that no one realizes that he initiated it. When one of the antagonists strikes him, he cries out at the unexpected blows as if he has been wronged. (אלשיך)