

Mishlei 18-19

Brotherhood

Key Concepts

People who are granted the privilege of sharing their youthful years with brothers or sisters don't give much thought to the powerful forces that can affect such a relationship. Hidden beneath the surface of comradeship and instinctive goodwill there is the potential for intense love born of a shared identity. At the same time there is the surprising potential of intense and lasting hatred born of envy and resentment.

These powerful emotions are inherent in the circumstance of the sibling relationship. They are brought into actuality when the right conditions are present, such as when a brother or sister is in desperate need or when there is an inheritance to be shared.

Exploring Mishlei

To make us aware of the strange forces that can affect any sibling relationship, Mishlei has presented us with a unique proverb that is subject to conflicting interpretations. This awareness can help an individual understand why he is instinctively reacting as he does and enable him to more effectively exert self-control so that his actions are governed by his wisdom.

The proverb draws our attention to a triggering event that causes individuals to be tested by the conflicting forces of brotherhood. That event occurs when one of the brothers perceives himself to have been wronged by the other. When a brother feels wronged, the natural resentment can promote bitter enmity or can lead him to draw on the reserves of love or duty that enable him to overcome resentment.

The alternate outcomes are reflected in two interpretations of the text of the proverb. The first interpretation shows what happens when the two brothers find the bonds of brotherhood to be so much stronger than their differences. The second interpretation shows what happens when the brothers are unable to forgive each other, resulting in a bitter enmity.

(יט) אַח נַפְשָׁע מִקְרִית עֹז וּמְדִינִים כְּבָרִיחַ אֲרָמוֹן:

Loyalty (19) *The loyalty of a wronged brother is more secure than a fortified city; and even when they become adversaries, the brothers overlook their differences, and their brotherly bonds remain firm like the locking bolt of a palace.*

Enmity (19) *The resentment felt by a wronged brother is more unyielding than a fortified city; and when they become adversaries, their alienation endures like the locking bolt of a palace .*

Learning Mishlei

Loyalty (19) *The loyalty of a wronged brother — אַח נַפְשָׁע is more secure than a fortified city — מִקְרִית עֹז, and even when the brothers become adversaries — וּמְדִינִים their love remains firm like the locking bolt of a palace — כְּבָרִיחַ אֲרָמוֹן.*

Enmity (19) *The resentment felt by a wronged brother — אַח נַפְשָׁע is more unyielding than a fortified city — מִקְרִית עֹז, and when the brothers become adversaries — וּמְדִינִים their alienation endures like the locking bolt of a palace — כְּבָרִיחַ אֲרָמוֹן .*

Additional Insight

A typical source of conflict between brothers occurs in a situation involving the distribution of an inheritance. The risks of misunderstanding and ill will are especially great because each party has such high expectations of the strength of his case, thinking of it like a fortified city. And yet the ruling in a court of law may bar him from what he thinks of as being rightfully his, just as a locking bolt keeps out intruders from a palace. For this reason, instead of relying on human judges, it is often advisable to let the matter be settled by the casting of a lot, as suggested in the previous proverb. (מלבי"ם)