

Mishlei 18-21

Speech – Contrasts

Key Concepts

Many people are fascinated by their power of speech. They always find something to say because of the pleasure it gives them to hear the sound of their own voice. When someone is speaking he assumes that a listener is paying attention to him. In effect, the talker has taken control of the listener's mind and that is a heady feeling indeed.

However, because people are so strongly motivated to express themselves in talk, they may not ask themselves if what they are saying is worthwhile. Even worse, it may actually be destructive, such as if it hurts someone's feelings or someone's good name. On the other hand, talking can do wonderful things, including cheering up another person and teaching him Torah.

Exploring Mishlei

(כא) מֹת וְחַיִּים בְּיַד לָשׁוֹן וְאַהֲבָיָה יֹאכַל פְּרִיָּהּ :

*(21) Death and life are in the power of the tongue;
and those who love it will eat its fruit.*

The purpose of this proverb is to point out the contrasting effects of worthwhile talk and destructive talk. These two situations are as far apart as life and death and that is how the proverb begins.

Surprisingly, the proverb speaks of death before life. This is to remind people of the great danger lurking in random talk. The great satisfaction many people find in the experience of talking makes them reluctant to think about the downsides of ill-considered talk. Talking can be destructive because of what is being said. It can also be destructive because of where, when, and to whom it is being said.

The proverb explores the effects of talking by illustrating it with two bodily organs: the tongue and the hand. Both of these essential organs of the body are designed to enable a person to serve Hashem, but both can be used to bring about death and destruction. It is up to talker to know the difference and to use his power wisely.

The ultimate effect of any action may be referred to as its fruit. Generally, we like to think of fruit as a good thing, but the destructive outcome of talk can be just as bad as the worthwhile outcome is good.

The proverb refers to a talker by the quality that is most dangerous, the fact that he loves it. If his motivation for talking lies in his emotional pleasure in the experience of talking, he may selfishly consider his own desire to speak out, rather than the effect of his act.

Learning Mishlei

(21) Death and life — מָוֶת וְחַיִּים
are in the power of the tongue — בְּיַד לְשׁוֹן
and those who love it — וְאֹהֲבֶיהָ
will eat its fruit — יֹאכַל פְּרִיָּהּ .

Additional Insights

[1] Among man's faculties, none is so constantly available as human speech. None can so instantly affect the light of truth, justice, morality, peace and happiness as spoken words. Therefore, Mishlei finds nothing more precious than a word spoken at the right time, and nothing more deadly. (רשר"ה)

[2] By using the expression יֹאכַל פְּרִיָּהּ (will eat its fruit), Mishlei is suggesting that spoken words have consequences to the speaker that are not limited by time. Just as a person needs to eat throughout his life, the consequences of his words will always be with him. (מלב"י)