

Mishlei 19-01

Innocence

Key Concepts

Every person has his own perception of the moral and ethical standards that guide his actions. Indeed, if he violates those principles, he feels some measure of guilt. That feeling is intensified if he realizes that others are aware of his violation of the standards.

Because guilt is a painful feeling, people tend to suppress it. They make an extra effort to keep the nature of their guilt hidden from others, especially from people they respect. Of course, nothing can be hidden from Hashem and that is the special challenge of a day like Yom Kippur.

Because guilt is so painful, a person's sense of his own innocence is clearly a blessing. Nevertheless, a person in difficult financial straits may be strongly motivated to violate his ethical standards for personal gain. Mishlei strongly urges him to overcome that urge. His immediate reward for doing so will be the blessing of innocence, that is, the ability to look other people in the eye with a clear conscience.

Exploring Mishlei

(א) טוב רש הולך בתמו מעקש שפתיו והוא כסיל:

(1) *It is better to be a poor man who goes through life with a clear conscience than to be one who perverts his lips with deceit, living as a fool.*

This proverb calls attention to the benefits of living with a clear conscience in comparison to one who violates his own moral and ethical standards in order to gain material wealth. The difference between guilt and innocence is so great that even if he is poverty stricken, he would be advised to live at peace with himself, knowing that he has not used devious practices to gain the upper hand. In contrast, the person who uses under-handed means to acquire wealth is a fool, for he is paying a high price for his seeming advantage.

Learning Mishlei

(1) It is **better** to be a **poor man** — טוב רש, who **goes** through life — הולך, in his state of **innocence** — בתמו, rather than be a liar of **crooked lips** — מעקש שקפתי, who is a **fool** — והוא כסיל

Additional Insights

[1] The alternative to poverty is not stated in the proverb, but there is a clear implication that even gaining a fortune does not justify the practice of deceit.

(הגר"א)

[2] The word **כסיל** (fool) may be understood as one who has the wisdom to know he is doing wrong but cannot resist his desire for material gain. (מלבי"ם)

[3] The man who perverts his lips with deceit is a fool because he was acting in a way that he thought would bring him happiness, but he would have achieved far greater happiness if he kept his state of innocence. (מצודות)

[4] The poor man who preserves his innocence stays true to the Torah wisdom he has acquired. In contrast the fool has lost the blessing of innocence, but has also corrupted Torah in his perverted attempt to justify himself. (רלב"ג)