

Mishlei 19-24**Apathy****Key Concepts**

There are people who have fallen into the habit of responding to any challenge with apathy. They know that worthwhile things need to be done but they are no longer able to muster the energy or will to make it happen.

People who are subject to apathy are ready to accept an inadequate situation rather than make the effort to change it. Perhaps they have been discouraged by criticism or by disappointment in past failures. Or else they have fallen prey to simple laziness.

Such people may be alerted to a call for action by the fear of Hashem or a pang of conscience. However, they find it hard to pull themselves together and to decide on a meaningful course of action.

Mishlei is very concerned about such people and uses stimulating allegories to wake them up and get them to look at themselves realistically. One of these is the subject of this proverb.

Exploring Mishlei

(כד) טַמֵּן עֵצֶל יָדוֹ בַּצֶּלֶחַת גַּם אֶל פִּיהוּ לֹא יָשִׁיבָנָה:
(24) *The lazy person puts his hand into the bowl;*
but he does not even return it to his mouth.

This proverb illustrates the effect of apathy by means of an allegory. Consider a hungry person. He reaches into a bowl of fruit to take a fresh apple, but in this extreme situation that is as far as he gets. He stops right there. Strange as it might seem, this victim of apathy has so little stamina that his hand remains in the bowl and never gets to his mouth. And so, he remains hungry because he would rather accept the state of hunger than overcome his reluctance to actually do something.

Learning Mishlei

The apathetic person — עֵצֵל

puts his hand — טָמַן יָדוֹ

into the bowl — בְּצִלְחָת.

But he does not return it — לֹא יִשְׁיבָנָהּ

even to his mouth — גַּם אֶל פִּיהוּ

and so he remains hungry.

Additional Insights

[1] The placement of this proverb after the one dealing with the fear of Hashem (Segment 19-23) suggests an important lesson. It is not enough to be motivated. A person has to have the energy and willpower to act. (רבינו יונה)

[2] If a person lacks initiative, he may not even earn enough to make living. He will go hungry and when his hand reaches into the bowl it will come up empty.
(אבן עזרא, מצודות)

[3] When a person gets into the habit of being a failure, he does not take a task through to completion. Even if it is easy to achieve and the goal is at hand his instinctive reluctance will stop him. Even if his hand reaches the food that is in the bowl, he will not bring it up to his mouth and get the rightful reward for his effort.
(מאירי)