

Mishlei 19-25

Deterrence

Key Concepts

How do you discourage a young person from engaging bad behaviour? How do you save him from having to suffer the consequences of actions that are sinful or self-destructive? It all depends on the attitude that individual has in regard to your efforts at deterrence.

Ultimately, deterrence is based on presenting the negative consequences of the behavior you want the person to avoid. Some people can learn only from experience, either their own or that of others. Other people can learn from a well-reasoned talk.

The proverb we are now looking at identifies three attitudes: the scoffer (לץ), the fool or simpleton (פְּתִי) and the thinker (גְּבוֹן). The scoffer is most difficult and will require a harsh experience to stop him in his tracks by word or physical action and make him realize the consequences of his behavior. You may even find that your efforts with him are initially unsuccessful.

The simpleton is much easier to deal with but is not likely to be impressed by an elaborate explanation of his error. However, if he happens to be present while the scoffer is having a bad experience, he will look at the matter with fresh eyes.

The thinker is eager to explore the reasons for avoiding a mistake. If you can respect his attitude and help him understand what he is doing wrong, he is likely to be responsive.

Exploring Mishlei

(כה) לץ תִּכָּה וּפְתִי יַעֲרֵם וְהוֹכִיחַ לְגְבוֹן יִבִּין דָּעַת :

(25) Strike the scoffer and the simpleton becomes smarter; rebuke an intelligent person and he will gain wisdom.

This proverb compares two methods of deterrence. The first consists of a harsh experience, such as hearing strong words or feeling physical pain. This experience

may not be harsh enough to have an effect on the scoffer, but the simpleton can learn his lesson by seeing what has happened to the scoffer. Thus, if you “strike the scoffer”, the simpleton will become smarter.

The second method of deterrence involves a carefully reasoned rebuke, whereby you explain that the path he is following will only cause him regret. Such an approach can be effective if the individual is reasonably intelligent and has a respectful attitude. Thus, the proverb holds out hope that he can be spared a harsh experience and will gain wisdom as a result of the thoughtful rebuke.

Learning Mishlei

If you **strike** a **scoffer** – לִץ תִּכֶּה
with harsh words or even mild physical pain,
then a watching **simpleton** – וּפְתִי
becomes smarter – יַעֲרֵם
and learns a lesson.

If you offer a well-reasoned **rebuke** – וְהוֹכִיחַ
to a thinking person – לְנֹבֵן,
he will gain understanding – יִבִּין דָּעַת
and gratefully accept your guidance.

Additional Insights

(1) The harsh experience of which the proverb speaks may be applied by external events, such as a natural calamity or illness. In such a case the lesson will be that much more powerful (הגר"א)

(2) The three attitudes covered here may correspond to three of the four sons mentioned in the Haggadah of Pesach: the wise son (חכם), the bad son (רשע), and the simple son (תם). The fourth son would then be (שאינו יודע לשאול), represented by the apathetic עצל covered in the previous proverb. (אבן יחייא)