

Mishlei 20-04

Rationalization

Key Concepts

People have a tendency to disregard common sense when they are motivated to behave badly. For example common sense teaches you that if you don't study you will remain ignorant. But since studying is hard work, you may instinctively excuse yourself from putting in the effort; that is, you will rationalize neglect of your studies. Even though this violates common sense, you may give in to the temptation to slack off on the learning effort, while still hoping to somehow come through with the insight to answer your exam questions.

Mishlei wants to help you face this illogical way of thinking and he does so with the metaphor of a lazy farmer. The farmer knows if he wants a bountiful crop at harvest time, he will need to put in effort during the ploughing season. Unfortunately, that season begins in winter when it is cold outside. This foolish farmer puts off facing the cold weather and somehow hopes for best when harvest time comes around.

The tendency to give in to the power of rationalization is especially strong when there is a time lapse between the cause and the effect. This is illustrated by the farming metaphor since the time between ploughing and harvesting can be many months.

Exploring Mishlei

(ד) מְחַרֵּף עֵצֵל לֹא יִחְרֹשׁ וְשָׂאֵל בְּקֶצֶר וְאֵין :

The lazy farmer does not go out to plough because of the winter cold, but he still wishes for a crop at harvest time and is surprised when there isn't any.

The lazy farmer is apt to find a reason for avoiding hard work, such as the cold of winter, which he thinks is a justification for not going out to plough his fields. Nevertheless, at harvest time that foolish man hopes for a good crop like every one else.

Learning Mishlei

Because of the winter cold — מְחַרֵּף the **lazy farmer** — עֵצֵל **does not plough**

— לֹא יִחְרֹשׁ, **but he wishes** — וְשָׂאֵל **at harvest time** — בְּקֶצֶר to have a good

crop, and yet **there isn't any** — וְאֵין .

Additional Insights

(1) Another example of the harm done by rationalization is the individual who fails to learn Torah when he is young, but is surprised to see how difficult learning has become in his old age. — **מדרש רבה**

(2) Just as ploughing prepares a field in the winter, youth is also the time of life to prepare the ground-work of one's moral character. This is not easy because human desires are especially strong at this time. However, the possibility of achieving moral wisdom is also great in these early years when the mind is open. The effect of that effort is then reaped throughout one's life. — **מלבי"ם**

(3) The value of ploughing is not evident immediately because it takes a long time for the crops to grow. Therefore, the farmer fails to see the value of the effort at the time he is making that effort. This is true of many investments in life. — **מאירי**

(4) The consequences of rationalization may be experienced in many aspects of life. Even the failure to deal with household repairs, such as fixing a leaky roof can result in costs far in excess of the the initial cost of repairs. Another important example is the failure to deal with health issues, such as food and exercise. People are inclined to neglect their doctor's advice because the tragic consequences of ill health tend not to be experienced immediately— **רבינו בחיי**

(5) The person who avoids hard work through rationalization thinks he has come out ahead by saving himself effort. He fails to realize that physical work keeps his body fit and adds years to his life. Sitting and resting, without exercise, for extended periods of time are not beneficial to bodily health. — **מוסר אביך**