

Mishlei 20-11

Character

Key Concepts

There are patterns of human behavior which are directly influenced by the person's underlying character traits (*middos*) such as pride, compassion, and honesty.

Mishlei points out that some character traits are even evident in a young child. We may observe this when aspects of a child's behavior fall into a pattern associated with a particular character trait. Of course, not everything a child does falls into a consistent pattern. Furthermore, as he matures, the child can be affected by social influence or his own developing intellect to strengthen or weaken particular character traits.

Exploring Mishlei

(יא) גַם בְּמַעֲלָלָיו יִתְנַפֵּר נֶעֱר אִם זֶה וְאִם יֶשֶׁר פְּעָלוֹ:

(11) *Even a child can be recognized by its behaviors, by whether its activity is pure and whether it is honest.*

In this proverb Mishlei distinguishes between two types of a child's activities, those which fall into characteristic behavioral patterns (**מַעֲלָלָיו**) and those which are best thought of as an isolated activity (**פְּעָלוֹ**). Only those activities which fall into patterns may be interpreted as signifying an inborn character trait.

Learning Mishlei

(11) Even by the pattern of its behaviors — גַם בְּמַעֲלָלָיו —
can the character of a child be recognized — יִתְנַפֵּר נֶעֱר —
whether seemingly morally pure or honest — אִם זֶה וְאִם יֶשֶׁר —
his individual activity may be — פְּעָלוֹ.

Additional Insight

The motivation for an individual action can be misinterpreted unless one sees it as part of a pattern of behavior. The Torah tells us that Moshe killed an Egyptian (*Shemos 2:12*), but it is ambiguous about why Moshe committed this violent act. Was it a sign of arrogance or perhaps cruelty? The Torah clears up the ambiguity

by pointing out the context, which was that “Moshe went out to his brothers and observed their burden.” This shows that Moshe was acting out of love and compassion for his fellow Jews. That was the emotion driving him throughout the time he led them out of Egypt. (מלבי"ם)

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