

Mishlei 20-14

Value

Key Concepts

A recurring theme throughout Mishlei is the high value of Torah wisdom. Mishlei now expands on this concept by considering what determines the value of any object. If you choose to focus on what it costs to buy the object or make it, the value depends on whether you have acquired it yet. A prospective buyer is reluctant to spend his money or put in painful effort on a purchase that is still unproven, and so he is unwilling to pay a high price. However, once he has taken possession, he is reluctant to give up the benefit he gets out of it unless he gets a high price for it.

Another way of looking at the value of an object is its intrinsic value, that is what benefits it is known to provide. An object that offers a large benefit will allow the seller to demand a high price by the laws of supply and demand.

Mishlei presents two proverbs to illustrate these two perspectives. In both cases, Torah wisdom comes out ahead and we see its high value.

Exploring Mishlei

(יד) רַע רַע יֹאמֵר הַקּוֹנֶה וְאֵל לוֹ אֵז יִתְהַלֵּל

(14) "It is bad, It is bad" says the buyer.

But when he goes on his way, then he boasts .

In the first of the two proverbs, the prospective buyer convinces himself that the object is not worth the price being asked. But once he leaves the store, having bought the item, he boasts about the good deal he did. If we substitute Torah wisdom for the object, we can understand that a person may be reluctant to put in the hard work needed to learn Torah and acquire its wisdom. It is only once he has achieved it that he recognizes its beauty and its value. He then takes pride in the painful effort he put in to get a worthwhile result.

(טו) יֵשׁ זָהָב וְרַב פְּנִינִים וְכָלִי יָקָר שְׂפָתַי דָּעַת

(15) There is gold and many pearls.

But lips of wisdom are a precious instrument.

In the second proverb Mishlei compares the value of jewels and wisdom. Although gold and pearls are attractive they offer only esthetic value. For true value, one can appreciate the lips of a scholar that are empowered to utter words of wisdom. This is an instrument that benefits the entire world. The lips of wisdom are truly a precious instrument, far more valuable than mere jewels.

Learning Mishlei

(14) “It is **bad**, It is **bad**” — רַע רַע

says the prospective buyer — יֹאמֵר הַקּוֹנֶה

But when he goes on his way — וְאָזַל לוֹ ,

then he boasts that it was worth the effort. — אֶזְיֵה יִתְהַלֵּל

(15) **There is gold** — יֵשׁ זָהָב

and many pearls. — וְרַב פְּנִינִים

But a truly precious instrument — וְכֵל יָקָר

are the lips of wisdom — שְׂפָתַי דַּעַת

Additional Insight

(1) As the student climbs step by step in Torah wisdom he keeps saying “It is bad” because he is not yet satisfied with the result he has achieved so far. (הגר"א)

(2) Gold and pearls are rare and so their price is high, but they are still relatively available when compared to lips of wisdom, which offer unique benefits in their ability to communicate Torah knowledge. (מצודות)