

Mishlei 03-13

Wisdom and Life

[Pesukim 3:13 thru 3:18]

Key Concepts

Wisdom is a glorious gift from Hashem, but it is a gift that is given only to those who are capable of receiving it. A person must prepare himself to receive Hashem's wisdom by learning Torah from a teacher or *sefarim* (holy books). If he does so, Hashem will provide the "*siyata dishmaya*" (Divine help) that enables him to "discover" wisdom like a person who finds a lost object.

Mishlei compares this situation to the challenge of finding silver or gold buried deep in the ground or finding pearls lying at the bottom of the ocean. A great deal of effort is required to take possession of these treasures but because of their great value, people continue to risk their lives in seeking to recover them.

When people hunt for treasure, they think of it as a means of accumulating wealth and honor, and thereby making a life for themselves. But often the search for wealth has the opposite effect, bringing the person to his grave.

Seen from this point of view, the effort to "find" wisdom becomes especially worthwhile. In comparison to gold and silver, which offer the illusion of great value, wisdom offers real and unlimited value, including a long life of peace and contentment in this world, followed by eternal life in the next. There is nothing that material pursuits can offer to compare with this great reward.

Exploring Mishlei

After contrasting wisdom, the key to life, with ordinary earthly treasure, Mishlei presents us with a positive metaphor. He identifies wisdom with the Tree of Life. In Gan Eden man did not fully appreciate the Tree of Life. He already had life — it was knowledge that he lacked. Then, when he sinned, he was evicted from Gan Eden and denied the Tree of Life which he no longer deserved. Mishlei reminds us that through the kindness of Hashem, man has been given another chance. He has, in effect, been given access to the fruit of the Tree of Life in the form of the wisdom of the Torah.

- (יג) אֲשֶׁרִי אָדָם מָצָא חֲכָמָה וְאָדָם יָפִיק תְּבוּנָה :
 (יד) כִּי טוֹב סַחֲרָה מִסֶּחֶר כֶּסֶף וּמִחֲרוֹץ תְּבוּאָתָה :
 (טו) יְקָרָה הִיא מִפְּנִינִים וְכָל חֲפָצֶיךָ לֹא יִשׁוּוּ בָּהּ :
 (טז) אַרְךָ יָמִים בְּיַמִּינָהּ בְּשִׂמְאוֹלָהּ עֵשֶׂר וְכָבוֹד :
 (יז) דְּרָכֶיהָ דְרָכֵי נֵעַם וְכָל נְתִיבֹתֶיהָ שָׁלוֹם :
 (יח) עֵץ חַיִּים הִיא לְמַחְזִיקִים בָּהּ וְתַמְכֶיהָ מֵאֲשֶׁר :

(13) Fortunate is the man who has found wisdom and the man who is able to derive understanding.

(14) For its dealings are better than dealings in silver. Its yield is [better] than fine gold.

(15) It is more precious than pearls and the value of anything you desire cannot compare to it.

(16) A long lifespan of days is at its right hand. At its left hand there is wealth and honor.

(17) Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its pathways are harmonious peace.

(18) It is a tree of life to those who firmly take hold of it. And those who sustain it are assured of fulfillment.

Learning Mishlei

(יג) אֲשֶׁרִי אָדָם מָצָא חֲכָמָה

(13) Fortunate is the man who has found wisdom — אֲשֶׁרִי אָדָם מָצָא חֲכָמָה. He was given the opportunity to learn from teachers and *sefarim* (holy books) and he was motivated by *mussar* to study the material conscientiously so that he became fluent in it.

וְאָדָם יִפְיֵק תְּבוּנָה :

And fortunate is the **man who can derive understanding** — **וְאָדָם יִפְיֵק תְּבוּנָה** by thinking through the wisdom that he has acquired, and developing new insights from it. As a result, he has become qualified to teach wisdom to others. Through the process of teaching, he reinforces the wisdom in his own mind.

(יד) כִּי טוֹב סְחָרָה מִסֶּחֶר כֶּסֶף

He is happy with the wisdom he has gained,
for its dealings are far more profitable — **כִּי טוֹב סְחָרָה**
than dealings in silver — **מִסֶּחֶר כֶּסֶף**.

The value of wisdom is so awesomely great that that acquiring it and accumulating it is a better investment of his time than acquiring silver.

וּמְחָרוֹץ תְּבוּאָתָה :

Its productive yield is even better **than** that of **fine gold** — **וּמְחָרוֹץ תְּבוּאָתָה**. Furthermore, as opposed to trading in precious metals, after completing a profitable transaction, the wisdom is still in his possession, and he also has the gratitude of the person whom he has taught.

(טו) יְקָרָה הִיא מִפְּנִינִים

It is more precious — **יְקָרָה הִיא**
than pearls — **מִפְּנִינִים**, whose special value is based on their not being found in our environment but in the distant sea. Similarly, wisdom does not originate in our world, but in the sublime world of the spirit. Therefore, it is worth giving up all one's human, physical desires in order to attain it.

וְכֹל חֲפָצֶיךָ לֹא יִשְׁווּ בָּהּ :

And anything you might desire — **וְכֹל חֲפָצֶיךָ**
cannot compare in value to it — **לֹא יִשְׁווּ בָּהּ**
for how can you compare something transitory with something eternal.

(טז) אַרְךְ יָמִים בִּימִינָה

If you conscientiously learn Torah wisdom without a selfish motive you will be rewarded with a long life so that you can continue to learn and do *mitzvos*.

You will find that as a primary benefit wisdom is accompanied by a **long** lifespan of productive **days** — אַרְךָ יָמִים — **at its right hand**. — בְּיְמִינָהּ

Not only will you have a long life in this world, but you will be rewarded with eternal life in the next.

בְּשֵׂמֶלֶךְ עֵשֶׂר וְכָבוֹד :

You will even find a secondary benefit, for

at its left hand — בְּשֵׂמֶלֶךְ,

wisdom is accompanied by **wealth and honor** — עֵשֶׂר וְכָבוֹד .

If your motive is not pure, you may not be worthy of the primary benefit, but you will still be eligible for the secondary benefit. Of course, wealth and honor can have the effect of shortening your life and so you are strongly advised not to rely on it.

(יז) דְּרָכֶיהָ דְרָכֵי נְעִים

Its ways are ways of pleasantness — דְּרָכֶיהָ דְרָכֵי נְעִים .

The wisdom of the Torah and its *mitzvos* bring joy to those who observe them for their nature is inherently sweet. The characteristic behavior of a *talmid chacham* is to be patient and pleasant with everyone. He is soft-spoken and calm.

In contrast to wisdom, the accumulation of wealth often involves great risk and tension. Once wealth is acquired it imposes the burden of sleepless nights spent worrying about it, protecting it from thieves and securing it from the uncertainty of changing market conditions.

וְכָל נְתִיבֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם :

And all its pathways are peace — וְכָל נְתִיבֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם . The foundation of the Torah is peace, which represents the reconciliation and harmonization of opposing forces. For example, reconciliation of differing views in learning Torah leads to the profound satisfaction and joy of understanding the secrets of Hashem's universe.

(יח) עֵץ חַיִּים הִיא לְמַחְזִיקִים בָּהּ וְתַמְכִּיהָ מֵאֲשֶׁר :

In contrast to the destructive nature of wealth, wisdom **is a tree of life** — עֵץ חַיִּים הִיא ,

whose health-giving properties assure a long life

to those who firmly take hold of it — לַמְחִזְקִים בָּהּ.

And those who sustain it are assured of fulfillment — וְתִמְכְּיָהּ מֵאֲשֶׁר.