

Mishlei 20-22

Retribution

Key Concepts

One of the most powerful motivations for human action is the desire to take revenge for a wrong that has been done to you. Surely, if you have been offended, you should not be prevented from demanding retribution! And yet the Torah explicitly forbids acts of revenge, as it says, “Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against any of your people” (Vayikra 19:18).

Hashem does not want you to repay evil with evil. Any kind of retribution weakens your own moral fiber. Even if your enemy falls because of an event that is not your doing, you are not permitted rejoice in his downfall. You must trust that Hashem will see to it that needs of justice will be met.

Exploring Mishlei

(כב) אֶל תֹּאמַר אֲשַׁלְמָה רָע קִוֵּה לִּי וַיִּשַׁע לָךְ.

(22) Do not say, “I will repay retribution for evil”, but put your hope in Hashem and He will save you from harm.

Mishlei wants you to appreciate the harm you are doing to yourself by participating in revenge. This posuk teaches that it is wrong to even speak of or plan plan revenge. Evil does not become good when used in the battle against evil. It is even wrong to ask Hashem to punish those who torment you. Just ask Him to save you and leave it to Him to take whatever action may be appropriate under the circumstances.

Learning Mishlei

Do not say, -- אֶל תֹּאמַר

“I will repay retribution for evil”, -- אֲשַׁלְמָה רָע

but put your hope in Hashem -- קִוֵּה לִּי

and He will save you from harm -- וַיִּשַׁע לָךְ.

Additional Insights

- (1) The expression 'קוּה לֵה' (hope in Hashem) implies a prayerful yearning for help from Hashem, as well as trust that He is the One who is capable of providing that help (אבן עזרא).
- (2) If you have been cheated in business, do not be tempted to cheat in turn (such as paying in counterfeit money for goods that were found to be defective). Instead leave it Hashem to make up for your loss and protect you from future losses. Hashem hates cheating no matter who does it. (מלבי"ם, מצודות)
- (3) Don't try to protect yourself from cheaters by dealing harshly with someone who has cheated you. (רבינו יונה)
- (4) On the whole, if you have enemies, rather than scheming on ways to fight them, concentrate on perfecting your own life. If your conduct is agreeable to Hashem, He will take care of you. There is even a possibility that He will change their animosity into esteem. (רשר"ה)