

Mishlei 20-28

Governance

Key Concepts

To be effective, a king must be proficient in the art of governance. This calls for the wisdom to discern the appropriate mix of the methods by which power is applied. Depending on the particular circumstance, these methods involve a degree of strict discipline combined with a degree of sympathetic understanding. Mishlei identifies these two components of governance as truth and kindness.

By acting benevolently with kindness, the king is able to draw upon the loyalty and love of the people. By maintaining a level of strict truth or justice, the king gains the respect that is needed to ensure compliance with the law.

The kind of wisdom needed by a mortal king is a reflection of the wisdom exercised by Hashem in His governance of humanity.

Exploring Mishlei

(כח) חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת יִצְרוּ מַלְךְ וְסֵעַד בְּחֶסֶד כִּסֵּאוֹ:
(28) *Kindness and truth protect a king,
and he supports his throne with kindness.*

The text of the proverb employs the word kindness (חֶסֶד) twice because kindness is not only needed in day-to-day governance, it ensures a lasting effect for continuity of the throne.

Learning Mishlei

(28) Kindness and truth — חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת —
protect a king — יִצְרוּ מַלְךְ —
and he supports — וְסֵעַד —
his throne with kindness. — בְּחֶסֶד כִּסֵּאוֹ

Additional Insight

[1] The “throne” in this proverb suggests the lasting future of the king’s royal dynasty, promoted by memories of the king’s benevolence (רבינו יונה)

[2] The right balance between truth and kindness serves to protect a mortal king

because the application of strict justice may lead an embittered person to strike him down. By the same token, an excess of kindness may make a disgruntled citizen unafraid to attack him fatally. However, the judicious mixture of love and respect guarantee the king's safety. (מלבי"ם)