

Mishlei 22-13

Pretexts

Key Concepts

People tend to make up excuses so as to avoid doing what they don't really want to do. Thus, if a lazy person is asked to leave the comfort of his home to perform a mitzvah, he might come up with a pretext that justifies his desire to stay home. If the pretext is sufficiently convincing, he might even get away with it.

Of course, if the pretext has no real validity and if the lazy one is honest with himself, he will not try it. Mishlei illustrates an invalid pretext by giving an example which is extremely unlikely to have actually happened. It is so unlikely, that the lazy one surely realizes that nobody would ever believe it.

Exploring Mishlei

(יג) אָמַר עֲצִיל אֲרִי בַחוּץ בְּתוֹךְ רְחֹבוֹת אֶרֶץ:

(13) *The lazy one says, "There is a lion outside; I will be killed in the streets."*

In the example presented by Mishlei, the lazy person has asked us to believe that if he goes out now, his life will be in danger because there is a man-eating lion loose in the streets. If this were true, he would easily be killed. However, the lazy person realizes that nobody is likely to believe this story. Therefore, he will not try it. Mishlei suggests that no fabricated story will ever be good enough to justify laziness.

Learning Mishlei

(13) The lazy one says, — אָמַר עֲצִיל

"There is a lion outside, — אֲרִי בַחוּץ

I am afraid that if I go out,

I will be killed in the streets." — בְּתוֹךְ רְחֹבוֹת אֶרֶץ

Additional Insights

[1] This proverb teaches that if a person gets into the habit of giving in to poor character traits such as laziness, he may be unable to discern how unreasonable are the pretexts he puts forth to excuse his laziness. (רבינו יונה)

[2] The story given in the proverb is intended to be absurd because even if there are lions about, they are likely to be in a forest rather than in an urban area such as where most people live. The implication is that any other pretextual story is likely to be absurd. (מלבי"ם)

[3] Preposterous excuses are a tool of the Evil Inclination (Yetzer Hara) to dissuade students from buckling down to their studies. A student who has not trained himself to resist the temptation may give in no matter how ridiculous the excuses are. Mishlei encourages the student to critically examine such a temptation and treat it as the subterfuge it really is. (הגר"א)