Mishlei Every Day

365 Gifts of Ancient Wisdom on Virtue and Vice

Volume One



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Erica Brown

Mishlei
Every Day

365 Gifts of Ancient Wisdom on Virtue and Vice | Volume I

Maggid Books

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Volume One

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Dedicated in honor of our children
who proudly continue our true Torah values

Daniel and Amy Gibber
Jacob and Jennifer Gibber
Marc and Dana Gibber
Michael and Paula Gibber
Mindy and Brian Pfefferman
David and Eliza Gibber

by
Elliot and Debbie Gibber

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Dedicated in honor of our children and grandchildren

This set of books and thoughts from Dr. Erica Brown on Mishlei provide practical wisdom and guidance to live a life of good character and good actions.

This combination is the true path to success in life

הִגִּיד לְךָ אָדָם מַה־טּוֹב וּמָה־יְהוָה דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמְּךָ
כִּי אִם־עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד
וְהַצְנֵעַ לֶכֶת עִם־אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

Cheryl and Lee Lasher



Dedicated in loving memory of our beloved mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother

Hilda Rotbard Pinewski z"l
רחל הינדה בת דבורה רבקה ושמחה דוד ז"ל

A survivor of the Shoah who lived a life of extraordinary courage, quiet strength, and radiant joy.

רַבּוֹת בָּנוֹת עָשׂוּ חָיִל – וְאַתְּ עָלִית עַל כֻּלָּנָה:
תְּנוּ־לָהּ מִפְּרִי יָדֶיהָ וִיהַלְלוּהָ בַשְּׁעָרִים מַעֲשֶׂיהָ:

"Many women have done well – but you surpass them all.
Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her deeds praise her in the gates."

Elisa and Alan Pines and Family

Author's Dedication

This book is dedicated to
Terri and Andrew Herenstein,
whose advice I seek and value
and whose friendship I treasure.

It is also dedicated to Haim Ben Arye,
an extraordinary Israeli bus driver
who helped evacuate survivors
from Kibbutz Be'eri on October 7th
and died of a broken heart on October 26, 2023.

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Chapter



Day 1

The Wise Writer

מִשְׁלֵי שְׁלֹמֹה בֶּן־דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל.

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel.
(Prov. 1:1)

First sentences are always tricky. What grabs a reader's attention enough to keep going? In Tanakh, this is largely resolved by a superscription: a sentence that names the author and offers genealogical and sometimes geographical information. Some may glide over these technical details and move on to the book's content without giving authorship more than a passing thought. But in Tanakh, authorship offers a worldview and a context for wisdom. This is true for all great and bad literature. Who writes something matters to our understanding of it and its worth. Even good

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authors write bad books, but people still buy them out of name recognition. Name recognition in *Mishlei* inspires readers to continue.

It is King David who receives the honorific here rather than King Solomon. This reinforces the aristocratic heft of the book. One king received wisdom traditions from another, and not just another king: his father. Ibn Ezra explains that by going back a generation, readers understand that King Solomon's wisdom was augmented as the son of a wise and enlightened parent in a book that will feature a father and son in a conversation for the ages.

Mishlei is traditionally attributed to King Solomon. This is reinforced in three places: our verse above; in chapter 10, "The proverbs of Solomon" (Prov. 10:1); and finally, "These also are proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah copied out" (25:1). The reader is not allowed to forget the writer. Elsewhere, King Solomon's writing career is summed up neatly: "And he spoke three thousand proverbs: and his poems were a thousand and five" (I Kings 5:12). King Solomon was a quote generator. He could sum up wisdom and deliver it to others succinctly and perceptively. Malbim (on Proverbs 1:1) explains the three ways King Solomon acquired this wisdom: through wisdom or prophecy (see I Kings 3:5–12); from a line of tradition, which explains why King David is mentioned here; and from experience.

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Rashi does not focus on authorship but on the first word, *mishlei* or "proverbs." The first word tells us what is ahead. Rashi writes that all of King Solomon's sayings here are illustrations and allegories. In this neat, four-word summation, Rashi tells us what we are about to read. There are a lot of ways to communicate wisdom through law, story, or anecdotes. Delivering content in adages helps the reader digest it in nuggets and pocket it for future use.

The verse tells us who. Rashi tells us what. *Midrash Mishlei* (1:1) tells us how: King Solomon fasted for forty days and nights to acquire the necessary understanding that resulted in *Mishlei*. In this zone of abstention and perhaps isolation, King Solomon may have tuned out worldly needs and distractions and stripped away that which is inessential to arrive at true knowledge.

Who best taught you how to think?

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Day 2

Prudence

לָדַעַת חָכְמָה וּמוּסָר לְהָבִין אִמְרֵי בִינָה.
לָקַחַת מוּסַר הַשְׂכֵּל צֶדֶק וּמִשְׁפָּט וּמֵישָׁרִים.
לָתֵת לִפְתָאיִם עָרְמָה לְנַעַר דַּעַת וּמְזִמָּה.

To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding; to receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion.

(Prov. 1:2–4)

Each of these verses begins with a powerful infinitive but is not grammatically a full sentence. Malbim (on 1:2) explains that these verses serve as an introduction to the contents of the book and the author's intention in writing it: "The book's purpose is to know God." There are many ways to

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contemplate God. You can look down at words in a book. You can look around at works of nature and the vastness of the horizon. Or you can take a good hard look in the mirror.

Malbim continues his explanation of Proverbs 1:2 by stating that the purpose of the book is to master wisdom. A person cannot achieve wisdom through self-study alone or knowledge through portents. Not every idea will fall into place with clarity. Some require intuition or what he refers to as received wisdom. This explains the elaborate ways that people come to know about God and the world, as signified by the many nouns and verbs used in these few opening verses. We learn through a complex web of intuition, reception, and instruction. Abraham ibn Ezra adds here that perception is the capacity to understand the difference between things and not confuse "darkness for light and light for darkness." On a literal level, there's not much perception required to distinguish light from darkness. On an emotional and conceptual level, the art of discernment can take a lifetime.

There may be another way to approach these first lines of Proverbs. Some will achieve knowledge by virtue of their own hard-earned perception. Some, who cannot access wisdom and justice by themselves, will learn them from the teachings of others. Those who cannot do either – the simple ones – need to be given clear and direct instructions. Note the absence of judgment in how wisdom is achieved or dispensed. What is critical is the outcome: a higher order of being. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in his essay "Wise

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Men and Fools" writes that "wisdom is more ancient than the world." Maybe the author of Proverbs is suggesting to his readers his own hope, namely, that his book can assist in this pursuit. We learn through reflection, through imitation, and through mistake-making. Proverbs is offering us a shortcut to wisdom through the concise treasure of each saying.

What's a saying that you live by that you came to through experience, or that you received from someone you love?

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