

September

Ill words are bellows to a slackening fire.

18:21 Death and life are in the power of the tongue;
those who love it will eat its fruit.

13:3 She who guards her tongue preserves life,
She who opens wide her lips, it is her ruin.

15:4 A healing tongue is a tree of life,
But a devious one makes for a broken spirit.

(*Armenian*)

What the sword cuts will heal;
what the tongue cuts will not.

Shakespeare (*Othello*)

“But words are words.
I never yet did hear
That the bruised heart
was pierced through the ear.”

Sir Thoman Vaux (*Of a Contented Mind*)

“Companion none is like
Unto the mind alone;
For many have been harmed by speech,
Through thinking, few or none.”



Discussion Questions

1. What is the subject of this set of proverbs?
2. What are some examples of each? How can speech heal? How can it inflict harm?
3. What does the Armenian proverb suggest?
4. Shakespeare's play *Othello* deals with the disastrous outcome of tale-bearing that results in the death of Othello's wife, Desdemona. How does this quote speak to the issue?
5. **If time allows:** How does the Vaux statement speak to this issue?
6. This cartoon presents a comical view of this subject. It actually seems to imply the *opposite* of the proverbs – that *acting nice* results in death. What are some possible readings of it?

Wrap-up: As we enter the period of repentance, we can be mindful of the fact that the majority of the sins we confess relate to improper, indiscrete and hurtful speech. When reciting these confessions, let us think about how we should use words to heal rather than harm, to soothe rather than chafe and to create harmony rather than discord in our lives.

Better one word less than one word too many.

17:27 A knowledgeable person is sparing with words;
A person of understanding is reticent.

15: 28 The heart of the righteous person rehearses her answer
But the mouth of the wicked blurts out evil things.

17:28 Even a fool, if she keeps silent, is deemed wise;
Intelligent, if she seals her lips.

Spinoza (*Ethics*)

“Surely human affairs would be far happier if the power in men to be silent were the same as that to speak. But experience more than sufficiently teaches that men govern nothing with more difficulty than their tongues.”

(*Turkish*)

To the big mouthed, the ladle is a spoon.



Discussion Questions

1. What is the general theme of these proverbs?
2. What is the benefit of such behavior?
3. What does Spinoza (17th century Jewish philosopher) observe about this matter?
4. What is the implication of the Turkish proverb?

5. What commentary does this cartoon provide for *Proverbs* 15:28?

Wrap-up: How can we apply these proverbs to our lives?

Pride and grace never dwell in one place.

(English)

16:18 Pride goes before ruin,
Arrogance before failure.

18:12 Before ruin a man's heart is proud;
Humility goes before honor.

13:10 Arrogance yields nothing but strife,
Wisdom belongs to those who seek advice.

25:26 It is not good to eat much honey,
Nor is it honorable to search for honor

(Italian)

Pride went out on horseback and returned on
foot.

(Chinese)

Pride invites calamity; humility reaps its harvest.

Ernest Lawrence Thayer (*Casey at the Bat*)

And now the leather-covered sphere
came hurtling through the air,
and Casey stood a-watching it in haughty
grandeur there.

Close by the sturdy batsman the ball
unheeded sped-
"That ain't my style," said Casey. "Strike one!"
the umpire said.

Discussion Questions

1. How can we characterize the biblical view of pride?
2. What other negative attributes or behaviors are synonymous with pride and are similarly criticized?
3. What does the book of *Proverbs* regard as the opposite attributes of pride/arrogance?
4. Does the book of *Proverbs* have a conflicting opinion about attaining honor?
5. In 13:10, what specifically arrogant behavior is condemned?
6. What is the relationship between eating too much honey and seeking honor?
7. What is the meaning of "pride went out on horseback...?"
8. How does the Chinese proverb reiterate the biblical characterization of pride?
9. In the famous poem, *Casey at the Bat*, the strutting and preening celebrity batsman strikes out, brought down by his own condescension. What is the intention of this passage?

Wrap-up: These proverbs demonstrate that over-arching pride is a danger to the soul as well as to our physical being. Modern psychology, on the other hand, underscores the importance of healthy self-esteem for emotional well being. How do we reconcile these conflicting views? The book of *Proverbs* suggests that we have the ability to reconcile these traditional and contemporary values when positive feelings about self are tempered by wisdom and humility.

Wealth: It grows wings and flies away...

11:28 He who trusts in his wealth shall fall,
But the righteous shall flourish like foliage.

22:1: Repute is preferable to great wealth,
Grace is better than silver and gold.

23:4-5 Do not toil to gain wealth; Have the sense to desist.
You see it then it is gone; It grows wings and flies away
Like an eagle, heavenward.

Seneca (*Roman philosopher, first century C.E.*)
“A great fortune is a great slavery.”

(*English*)

He is not poor that has little, but he that desires
much.

Benjamin Franklin (*Poor Richard's Almanac*)

“He that is of the opinion money will do every-
thing, may be suspected of doing everything for
money.”

Discussion Questions

1. How is wealth characterized in these examples of biblical and universal proverbs?
2. Do the biblical proverbs imply that money is evil or unnecessary?
3. Why should a great fortune make great slavery?
4. What does Benjamin Franklin see as the trap for the individual who thinks that money can achieve anything?

Wrap-up: These statements do not criticize money, per se. Rather, they criticize the quest for wealth as an ultimate goal. They articulate the view that wealth does not measure the worth of the individual; but rather characteristics such as reputation, grace and righteousness do.

In other parts of the book of *Proverbs*, the view is also expressed that charity and generosity are important values, as are righteous and appropriate outlets for those possessing wealth.

Haste makes waste

19:2 A person without knowledge is truly not good;
He who moves hurriedly blunders.

20:25 It is a snare for a man to pledge a sacred gift rashly
And to give thought to his vows only after they have been made.

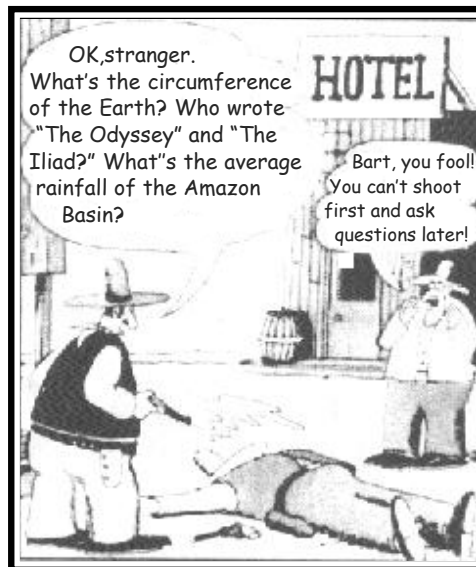
21:5 The plans of the diligent make only for gain;
All rash haste makes only for loss.

(Greek)

Make haste slowly.

(Moroccan)

Haste is the sister of repentance.



Discussion Questions

1. What do all three biblical proverbs imply about decisions made in haste?

2. What is problem with making vows rashly?

3. Is this still applicable today?

4. How would you explain the oxymoron of making haste slowly?

5. Why is haste the sister of repentance?

6. What is the cartoon's message?

Wrap-up: The best way to avoid the negative results of hasty decisions is the same as avoiding the pitfalls of indiscrete speech: we must think about the consequences of our actions *before we do them*, rather than after they are done.

Interpersonal Relations

Group I

9:1 | A man shows intelligence by his forbearance;
It is his glory when he overlooks an offense.

Tennyson (*Lady Clara Vere de Vere*)
“Kind hearts are more than coronets,
[and simple faith than Norman blood.]”

Group II

24:26 Giving a straightforward reply
Is like giving a kiss.

(*Maltese*)
A well-timed reply is worth its weight in gold.

Group III

29:5 A man who flatters his fellow
Spreads a net for his feet.

Moliere (*Le Misanthrope*)
“The more we love our friends, the less we flatter them;
it is by excusing nothing that pure love shows itself.”

Discussion Questions

1. According to the book of *Proverbs*, what types of behavior contribute to effective interpersonal relations?
2. All of these biblical proverbs suggest a kind of behavior that is difficult for many of us: overlooking mistakes of others and speaking in an honest and straightforward manner, regardless of the consequences. Do you think these are contradictory messages?
3. In Group I, what is the relationship between the biblical proverb and the Tennyson quote?
4. What is the subject of Group III?
5. Why is flattery like “spreading a net for the feet?” What is the implication of this metaphor?
6. Is flattery always inappropriate? When is it appropriate?
7. The proverbs in Group II extol well-timed, straightforward responses. How are they similarly regarded?
8. What is the value of such a response? What are some examples of this?

Wrap-up: All of these statements suggest that a key to successful relations with others is that we think and care about the consequences of our speech and actions. But we can see that there is contradictory advice about appropriate behavior. When do we speak honestly, and when do we ignore? Is kindness the most important goal, and does that trump everything else? How do we distinguish between flattery and compliments? These are questions that we all must answer, and the difficulty posed by the internal contradictions underscores that maintaining good human relations requires both thought and compassion.

How good it is when brothers live together (or could be)

(Psalm 133:1)

17:1 Better a dry crust with peace
than a house full of eating with strife.

11:29 He who troubles his own house
shall inherit the wind.

17:14 To start a quarrel is to open a sluice;
Before a dispute flares up, drop it.

Aesop (*The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse*)

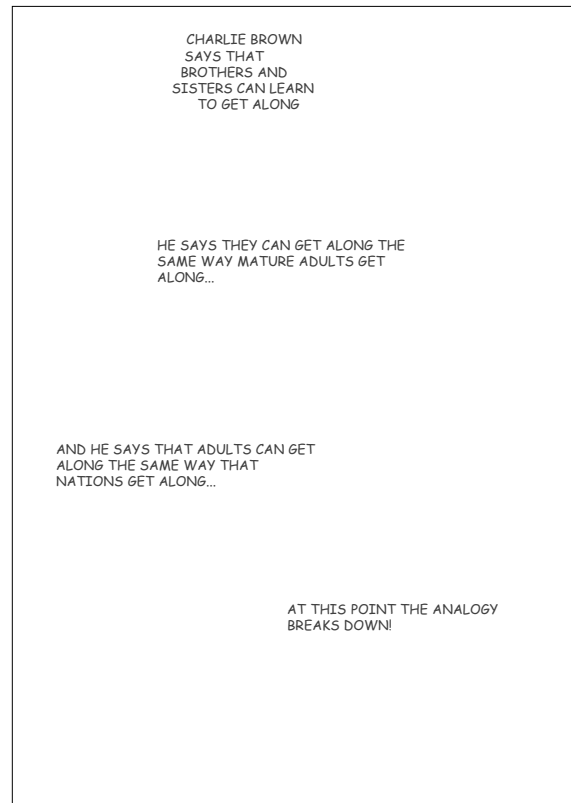
Better beans and bacon in peace than cakes and
ale in fear.

(Dutch)

Better to keep peace than to make peace.

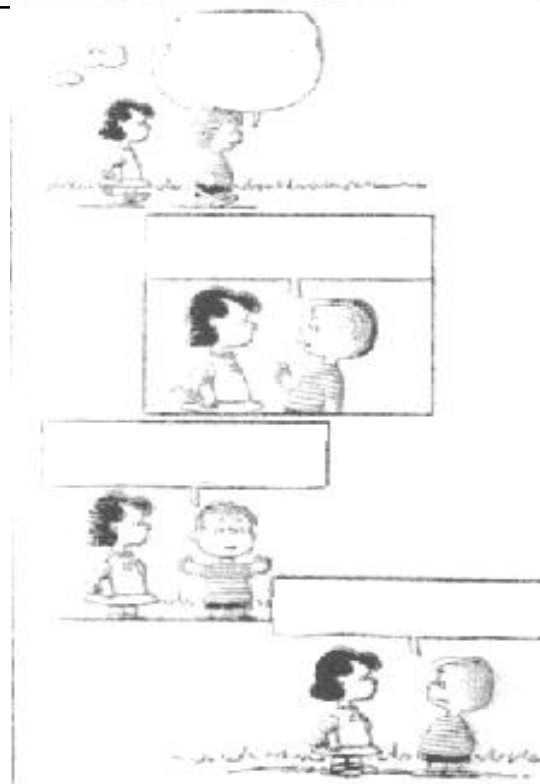
Mark Twain

It is easier to stay out than get out.



Discussion Questions

1. What does this wisdom literature say about the concept of peace?
2. What does *Proverbs 11:29* suggest in the expression "...shall inherit the wind"?
3. There is a similar theme in the Dutch proverb and Mark Twain's comment. What is it? Give some examples of this.
4. How might these proverbs be applied to contemporary Israel?



about the

rings of
We are
the words
evet abim
brothers
by God.

Let the work of our hands prosper

(*Psalms 90:17*)

13:11 Wealth may dwindle to less than nothing,
But he who gathers little by little increases it.

12:24 The hand of the diligent wields authority;
the negligent are held in subjection.

20:4 In winter the lazy man does not plow;
At harvest time he seeks, and finds nothing.

Benjamin Franklin (*Poor Richard's Almanac*)

“Never leave that till tomorrow which you can
do today.”

(*Danish*)

Diligent work makes a skillful workman.

(*Moroccan*)

Endurance pierces marble.

The Little Red Hen

Who will help me grind the wheat?” said the
little red hen.

“Not I” said the duck.

“Not I” said the goose.

“Not I” said the pig.

“Then I’ll do it myself,” said the little red hen.

And she did.

Discussion Questions

1. In this set of statements, what does diligence accomplish?
2. All state explicitly that hard work yields *tangible* results. What are some of the less tangible gains that they imply as well?
3. In *Proverbs* 13:11, what is the relationship between the two statements?
4. What are some bad consequences of putting off until tomorrow what can be done today?
5. In the story of the little red hen, the message is simple and effective: hard work pays off to those prepared to do the heavy lifting. How can we invest such a simple and obvious message with gravity?

Wrap-up: The diligence in this study unit, refers specifically to hard work. It necessitates that we remain focused, on-task and vigilant. Whether in the workplace or at home, or within our Sisterhood, we need to acknowledge that the measure of success is variable: sometimes it is in a fabulous program and sometimes it is in taking a first step. But it is clear that *action is necessary*; dreaming, no matter how creative or well-intentioned, yields nothing.

Learning: the bitter root that bears sweet fruit (Czech)

13:14 The instruction of a wise man is the fountain of life,
Enabling one to avoid deadly snares.

16:16 How much better to acquire wisdom than gold;
To acquire understanding is preferable to silver.

18:15 The mind of an intelligent man acquires knowledge;
The ears of the wise seek out knowledge.

Disraeli

“Ignorance never settles a discussion.”

(Yiddish)

Learning cannot be inherited.

(Indian)

Learning is more substantial than accumulated riches.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the benefits of learning, as spelled out by this material?
2. What does the metaphor “fountain of life” imply? Do you agree with this?
3. How does Disraeli view education?
4. What does the Yiddish proverb say about the process of education?
5. Several proverbs characterize learning as the ultimate wealth – more valuable than gold and riches. In your experience, is this a valid assumption today?

Wrap-up: For Jews, education is one of the oldest and most sustained cultural traditions. Historically, we have revered our scholars and intellectuals, and we have revered knowledge and the process of acquiring it. Until this past century, study as an important occupation and avocation was expected only of men. Today, learning is equally valued and central to the lives of women. But our days are filled with a host of activities, and it is unfortunate that once most of us leave formal education behind, the process of active learning is circumscribed.

As members of an organization promoting Jewish education, we can be inspired by the statement in *Pirke Avot* about maintaining an ongoing commitment to study: “Say not, ‘when I have leisure, I will study’. Perhaps you will have no leisure.”

(*Pirke Avot* 2:5)

Proverbs and Prudence: A Potpourri of Common Sense

21:16 A man who strays from the path of prudence
Will rest in the company of ghosts.

26:27 He who digs a pit will fall in it,
and whoever rolls a stone, it will roll back on him.

22:28 Do not remove the ancient boundary stone
That your ancestors set up.

25:16 If you find honey, eat only what you need,
lest, forfeiting yourself, you throw it up.

Shakespeare (*Hamlet*)

“Confess yourself to heaven;
Repent what’s past; avoid what is to come.”

Shakespeare (*King Lear*)

“Have more than thou showest,
Speak less than thou knowest,
Lend less than thou owest.”

(*English*)

An ounce of prudence is worth a pound
of gold.

Benjamin Franklin (*Poor Richard’s Almanac*)

“A spoonful of honey will catch more flies
than vinegar.”



**Uh-oh, I’ve got a feeling I shouldn’t have been munching
on these things for the last mile.”**

Discussion Questions

1. How can we define common sense?
2. What behaviors are prescribed by this material?
3. What makes this behavior – that is commonly acknowledged as prudent and wise – *so difficult*?
4. What biblical message can we derive from this Far Side cartoon?

Wrap-up: The book of *Proverbs* offers a blueprint for living a moral life: be careful, be moderate, be humble, be kind, don’t repeat mistakes, play nicely with others. This is behavior that we all applaud and want to embrace. But our human frailties, that induce us sometimes to do what is counter-intuitive despite our teaching and experience, undermine our desire to be prudent. We laugh at the guy munching potato chips as he trudges through the desert and shriek: *What are you thinking?* But this question provides us with a model for an internal check system: before we act, we should ask ourselves: *Do I want people to say, “What was she thinking?” or do I want them to say “yi’shar koach”?*