



## SHABBAT SERMON

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If we come as tourists to the ancient town of Mishlei, what would be our initial impressions? Standing in the town centre we see signposts pointing in several directions and it is difficult to know which one to follow. Do we choose the street labelled ‘wisdom and folly alley’, or the one called ‘righteous and wicked boulevard’ or, perhaps, ‘wealth and poverty row’? If we walk along the broad thoroughfare whose beautiful houses seem to epitomise solid bourgeois values, we may find on turning the corner that we are suddenly entering the red-light district? If we stop to ask directions we are likely to meet an elderly gentleman eager to be helpful. But he is clearly feeling a bit lonely, and really happy to find an audience. So he may drift into a long lecture on all the important wisdom he learnt from his father which he is now very eager to pass on to anyone who is willing to listen. Somewhere in the middle of his discourse we may pick up how disappointed he is with his own son who, despite the excellence of his father’s instructions and the wise teachings of his mother, has frequently been seen in dangerous company (1:10-19), has dallied with women he should most definitely not know (7:7-27), has lost a lot of money because he was too lazy to do any work (6:10-11; 24:30-34), and now spends much of his time getting drunk (23:29-35). It is as if behind every bit of sound advice that the old man has given his son, and wishes to give to us, we can recognize a painful experience. As the saying goes: ‘Even in laughter the heart may ache; and in the end joy may turn to sorrow.’ (14:13) But don’t try to comfort the old man, ‘A worn out garment on a cold day is like vinegar on chalk, and so is one who sings songs to a broken heart!’ (25:20)

Of course, once we have found our bearings, booked into a reasonable hotel and bought a map, we can begin to become more selective in the places we visit and the people we spend our time with. It is much nicer to have a lunch of simple vegetables, or even some dry piece of bread, prepared in a home full of love than a sirloin steak in a wealthy mansion where people clearly hate each other. (15:17; 17:1) Of course you cannot always tell what someone’s financial status is on a first visit. There are people who pretend to be rich but have nothing, and others who pretend to be poor even though they are quite rich. (13:7) Sadly, even here in Mishlei, they like to put on a show because they know that the poor man is hated by his neighbour, but the rich man has many friends. (14:20) Actually, having meals in this town can be somewhat risky. So-called ‘great people’ or those with an evil eye make dangerous hosts – don’t eat too much, and certainly not the expensive offerings, because there is always a price to be paid. (23:1-3, 6-8) And watch your back if you get an invitation to dine with the king, his friendship may be fine but the anger of a king is like a messenger of death. (14:35; 16:14) In all things it is better to act with discretion. Even a fool when he keeps quiet is thought to be wise, and whoever shuts his mouth is considered to be a person of understanding. (17:28) After all, death and life are in the power of the tongue. (18:21)

The city is quite prosperous, and people are well dressed. There is quite a lot of street theatre, and from time to time a couple of women turn up, clearly rivals, and set up their stalls at each end of the market place with pamphlets and offering free food and drink. Unfortunately, to get the refreshments, you have to listen to surprisingly similar lectures on the virtues of their particular brand of wisdom, but it can be a pleasant way to spend a warm afternoon (9:4-6; 16-17).

You can usually find a good bargain in the market place, but you should learn how to negotiate effectively and try to beat down the price. 'It is bad, it is bad' says the buyer; but when he has left then he starts to boast! (20:14) Their bylaws are carefully formulated to protect the purchaser, for example, one of them reads 'Diverse weights are an abomination to the Eternal; and a false balance is not good!' (20:23) They have a strong legal system and certain ordinances protect the poor, such as: 'Do not remove the ancient landmarks; and do not enter the fields of the fatherless.' (23:10) Moreover, their culture emphasises the need to take responsibility and intervene if they see abuse and not just ignore it. 'If you say: 'Look! We did not know this', does not the One who weighs the heart consider it. Does the One that keeps your soul not know, and treat everyone according to their actions?' (24:12) They even have a proverb, 'Whoever stops his ears at the cry of the poor, shall also cry, but not be answered!' (21:18)

After a prolonged visit to Mishlei, you may decide that this would be a nice place in which to settle down. Of course, the charm of first impressions as a tourist may not be quite the same when you have to deal with the realities of daily life and of things like obtaining a work permit. If you have problems with this, you may like to remember that 'a man's gift makes room for him, and brings him before great men.' (18:16)

Among the good qualities of the town, neighbourliness is considered very important. For example, never say to your neighbour 'Go away and come again, and tomorrow I will give it to you' when you have it with you. (3:28) Rather you should do your best to play a constructive part in the life of the city, because, as they like to say, by the blessing of the upright a city is exalted. (11:11) They lay great stress on having a good reputation: Remember, a good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and better than silver and gold is good favour. (22:1)

So, if you want to stay, you might like to pick up a pamphlet from one of the marketplace ladies, depending on which one appeals to you most. Both have pretty much the same text; things like: incline your ear and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart to knowledge. (22:17) Time alone will tell which one is best for you. Remember: 'Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Eternal weighs the heart.' (21:2) Nevertheless, living in Mishlei, one thing is certain, 'surely there is a future, and your hope shall not be cut off.' (23:18)

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