

Foreword:
THE ALSHICH'S UNIQUE COMMENTARY

by David Rose

R' Moshe Alshich *HaKadosh* (referred to as “the Alshich” in this work) wrote an exhaustive commentary on most of the books of the *Tanach*. Those commentaries were abridged transcriptions of the weekly *derashos* that he delivered every Shabbos in the city of Tzefas. Although he did not write a specific commentary on *Pirkei Avos*, many of his sermons quoted and elaborated on Mishnayos in *Pirkei Avos*. In 1764, R' Yirmeyahu Schlanker collected those discourses into a book on *Pirkei Avos* which he entitled *Yarim Moshe*. The present work is a translation into English of selections from *Yarim Moshe*, annotated and elucidated for the modern reader.

The Alshich's commentary on *Pirkei Avos* is unique. Like the commentary of R' Yitzchak Abarbanel on *Tanach*, the Alshich's comments invite the reader to consider a series of thought-provoking questions before he begins his explanation. However, unlike the Abarbanel, whose questions address the broader picture, the Alshich's questions generally focus on minutiae in the text. And while many Torah commentators throughout the generations have examined the nuances of the Torah's text through a microscope, the Alshich is probably the only commentator who examines every nuance of a Mishnah's text in the same manner.

His commentary questions such points as why one particular word was chosen rather than a synonym; why clause B appears specifically after clause A; and how a *pasuk* quoted by a Mishnah proves its point. The commentary also raises questions on the content and substance of the Mishnah, asking, for example, why the Mishnah includes a seemingly obvious statement, or pointing out an apparent contradiction to another teaching of the Sages. Such queries lead the reader to re-examine the Mishnah closely and then say to himself, “Why didn’t I think of that?”

Having presented the difficulties, the Alshich carefully begins his brilliant analysis. He does not confine himself to *pshat* (the simple meaning of the text), but utilizes *derash* (homiletic interpretations), *remez* (allusions), and occasionally Kabbalah — whatever is best suited for each question. The Alshich draws on his encyclopedic knowledge of *Tanach*, Gemara, and Midrash, and utilizes his extraordinary powers of *chiddush* (innovative thinking) as he addresses one difficulty after another. Sometimes he demonstrates how a seemingly superfluous phrase — or word, or letter — holds the key to the correct understanding of the entire Mishnah. Other times, he shows how seemingly unrelated Mishnayos that follow each other in *Pirkei Avos* are in fact related. For example — and indeed, uniquely — the Alshich explains that when a Mishnah begins with the words, הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, *He used to say*, it is because the teaching that follows comes to address a difficulty with a statement made by the same Tanna in the preceding Mishnah.

Often, the Alshich introduces a new way of understanding the entire thrust of a Mishnah. An excellent example of this is Mishnah 2:20, which states: רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן אוֹמֵר, הַיּוֹם קָצַר וְהַמָּלְאָכָה

מְרָבָה, וְהַפּוֹעֲלִים עֲצֵלִים, וְהַשָּׂכָר הַרְבֵּה, וּבַעַל הַבַּיִת דּוֹחֵק — *R' Tarfon used to say: The day is short, there is much work, the workers are lazy, the reward is great, and the master [i.e., Hashem] is pressing.* With brilliant insight, the Alshich explains that in these five phrases, R' Tarfon is coming to respond to five incorrect approaches to the study of Torah. Once such a theme has been discovered, many difficulties in the Mishnah simply fall away.

The Alshich's genius may also be seen in Mishnah 4:22, which discusses the very foundation of faith in God: הוּא אֵל, הוּא הַיּוֹצֵר, הוּא הַבוֹרֵא, הוּא הַמְּבִיֵן, הוּא אֵד, הוּא הַדֵּיִן, הוּא בֶּעַל דֵּין, הוּא הַיּוֹדֵד לְדוֹן — *He is God, He is the Maker, He is the Creator, He is the One Who understands, He is the Witness, He is the Judge, He is the Plaintiff, He is the One who will judge in the future.* The Alshich proceeds to interpret each description of Hashem and state why each of them has to be included. The result is a philosophy for living that ultimately answers those who deny God's involvement in man's life. With equal perspicacity, he explains in Mishnah 5:6 why certain things had to be made specifically during twilight on the first Friday of Creation, connecting that moment when the holy (Shabbos) met the mundane (weekdays), to the metaphysical elements found in each of the ten physical creations mentioned in the Mishnah.

His originality may be seen in his analysis of Mishnah 5:20, which reads: הָיוּ עַז כַּנְמֹר, וְקַל כַּנְּשֵׂה, הַיּוֹדֵה בֶן תִּימָא אָוִמֵר: הָיוּ עַז כַּנְמֹר, וְקַל כַּנְּשֵׂה, וְרַץ כַּצֶּבִי, וְגִבּוֹר כַּאֲרִי לְעִשׂוֹת רְצוֹן אָבִיךָ שְׁבַשְׂמִים — *Yehudah ben Teima says: Be bold as the leopard, light as the eagle, swift as the deer, and strong as the lion to fulfill the will of your Father in heaven.* In the Alshich's reading of this Mishnah, the Tanna is offering a four-part program for personal growth and self-

improvement, based on the behaviors of these four animals in their natural environments.

The Mishnayos in *Pirkei Avos* touch upon countless tenets of Judaism, such as the proper motivation in performing mitzvos; reward and punishment; the suffering of the righteous; our tasks in this world; and the Afterlife in the World to Come. The Alshich's discourses on these Mishnayos will thus provide the reader with countless insights into the essence of what it means to be a Jew.

As one studies the Alshich's commentary, he begins to understand why the Arizal said that the Alshich merited to reveal one of seventy valid ways to understand Torah, and why the *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* said he was "one in a generation."

The Translation

The translation is not a literal one. While the translators have endeavored to capture something of the flavor of the Alshich's flowery style, which borrows frequently from Biblical and Talmudic phraseology, the English rendering uses contemporary idiom and sentence structure. In order to enhance readability, tangential paragraphs have either been moved to the footnotes or omitted altogether. The English commentary reflects the Alshich's own words; explanations added by the translators or editors generally appear in the footnotes. Occasionally, the Alshich's own explanation has been elaborated upon for the benefit of the reader. The twin concerns of loyalty to the Alshich and clarity for the reader have served as guideposts throughout.

Redundancies have been omitted to allow the sequence of ideas to flow smoothly. Questions were at times combined or rearranged (and on rare occasions, omitted altogether). Since

this is a work on *Pirkei Avos*, the translators excluded those segments whose primary focus is a *pasuk* of the *Tanach*, and included only those whose main focus is *Pirkei Avos*. Of the Kabbalistic ideas the Alshich incorporates into his explanations, only those that are fairly well-known even to the uninitiated have been included. The translation of the Mishnayos themselves has been adapted to fit with the Alshich's understanding of the Mishnah at hand.

The Alshich's discussions of the Mishnayos in Chapters 5–6 (with the exception of 5:13–14) differ markedly from his explanations of the Mishnayos in Chapters 1–4, in that they do not begin with a series of questions and answers as described above. (Nevertheless, a keen-eyed student will quickly realize that the Alshich formulated most of his *derashos* as responses to textual difficulties.) This distinction is reflected in the different translation styles utilized in this book: The first four chapters were written by Rabbi Nahum Spirn as a free translation of the Alshich's words, while the last two were written by Rabbi Avie Gold as an adaptation of the Alshich's commentary.

The appeal of the Alshich has not diminished over the centuries. At the same time, however, even advanced students have found his commentaries difficult to comprehend — to the point that it is the rare individual who has gained from his great elucidation and clarification of Torah teachings. This work attempts to rectify this by opening the door to the Alshich's masterful teachings on *Pirkei Avos*.

I will be gratified if readers of this book come away with innumerable, previously unimagined insights into dozens of Mishnayos in *Pirkei Avos*. But just as importantly, it is my hope that readers will reach new heights of appreciation for

the exactness of the Sages' choice of language — throughout their writings — after learning about the precision of the language in *Pirkei Avos*, as taught by the unique Torah giant, R' Moshe Alshich.