

FOREWORD

The Alshich Haggadah – Timeless Wisdom on the Seder

by Rabbi Avie Gold

Rav Moshe Alshich was born in Turkey in 1508 and lived there for almost three decades. Although the origin of the family name Alshich is unclear, it is known that Rav Moshe's father, Rav Chaim, was among the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 and therefore the name could be Spanish for "El Sheikh" — "the Chief" — meaning "the Rabbi" of a community. Rav Moshe studied under Rav Yosef Taitatzik, and Rav Yosef Caro (popularly known as the Beis Yosef), author of the *Shulchan Aruch*. When the Beis Yosef emigrated to Tzefas in Eretz Yisrael in 1535, he asked his prize disciple to join him. Rav Moshe gladly accompanied his mentor, who soon appointed him to a seat on the *Beis Din* (Rabbinical Court) of Tzefas. Rav Moshe was so highly regarded as a saintly scholar that through the centuries he has been referred to as *HaAlshich HaKadosh*, "The Holy Alshich." A comprehensive biography appears on page 281 at the end of this book.

The Holy Alshich was regarded by many Torah scholars and teachers as the greatest preacher and *darshan* of his century. The Chida (Rav Chaim Yosef David Azulai), in his great eighteenth-century biographical and bibliographical work *Shem HaGedolim*, describes and praises the Alshich's method of illuminating Torah for the masses: "Many rabbanim explained the Torah based on the teachings of the Sages of the Talmud and Midrash, along with hints of *chochmah* and *mussar*. The

greatest among those expositors was Rav Moshe Alshich.” His allegorical method of interpretation coupled with his meticulous attention to every detail in the Torah’s text provides a happy balance that incorporates the intellectual, the rational and the ethical approaches to Torah elucidation.

The Alshich’s Torah commentary is based on the sermons related to the weekly Torah portions that he delivered every Shabbos in Tzefas. His sermons on *Shemos*, *Va’eira* and *Bo* touch upon the main themes and narratives of *yetzias Mitzrayim*, the Exodus from Egypt, and they form the basis of the commentary in this Haggadah. His integrated approach is readily apparent even before we begin reading the Haggadah itself, for the Alshich interprets the opening Mishnah of tractate *Pesachim*, which teaches the laws of the search for *chametz* on the night before the Seder and its destruction on the morning of Erev Pesach, as a succinct lesson in living a full and vibrant spiritual life in the service of Hashem.

The Alshich will often lead us on a road that other classical commentaries neither consider nor comment upon. An example of this is his analysis of the poem *Kaddesh Urchatz* that we chant at the beginning of the Seder, which the Sages of an earlier generation composed as a mnemonic to help us remember the correct order in which we are to do the mitzvos of the Seder. But to the Alshich, the fourteen elements of this poem address the person seeking to rectify his spiritual sluggishness by teaching him a step-by-step program that guides him to true repentance. Thus, *Kaddesh* instructs him to sanctify himself by refraining from overindulgence, even concerning permitted pleasures; *Urchatz* tells him to wash himself, that is to cleanse himself of any acquired spiritual impurities, etc.

When we reach *Maggid*, the retelling of the Exodus experience, which is the major purpose of the Seder, the Alshich takes us down the road of analysis, interpretation and explanation of

the verses cited in the Haggadah text. His commentary focuses both on the forest and on each individual tree. His expositions almost always begin with a series of thought-provoking questions on a passage of two, three or four verses. These questions take many forms. He may quote the Sages of the Talmud or the Midrash, or a Kabbalistic passage of the *Zohar*, and ask how that teaching fits in with the wording of the verse under discussion. Some of his questions address the overall theme of the verses; others examine grammatical anomalies or ponder the precise meaning of a word. Examples of these, as well as other types of questions, abound in this Haggadah:

“Why did Hashem afflict the Egyptians with these particular Ten Plagues, in this particular order?”

“*Midrash Rabbah*’s teaching about the Exodus seems to run counter to the cited verse; how can we reconcile the two?”

“The Haggadah cites two consecutive *pesukim* from the Book of *Yechezkel*, but in reverse order. Why did the Sages find it necessary to edit the words of the *Tanach*?”

“Why does the Haggadah quote *pesukim* that seem to contain superfluous words?”

“What was Hashem’s purpose in having the former slaves set aside their lambs for the *Korban Pesach* precisely four days before they were to offer them?”

He both raises “common sense” questions that make us wonder why they never occurred to us and finds difficulties that we would never have discovered on our own. Then, using his deep intellect, ingenious creativity and vast knowledge, he links dissimilar, often unrelated sources by weaving them together into a unified, seamless interpretation that answers all the questions he has posed.

The Alshich’s true brilliance is revealed in his ability to find the basis for his ideas and insights in the Written Torah itself. His close reading of every word in these verses to substantiate

his explanation of the relevant verses leads to explanations that sometimes seem to strain the boundaries of *pshat* (ordinary meaning) and are sometimes quite different from what other commentaries consider the literal meaning of a passage. Nevertheless, it is often only the Alshich's interpretation that answers all the questions he has raised and reconciles the apparent discrepancies, even those that other commentaries indeed consider contradictory, yet leave unresolved.

His powerful analysis of each of the four sons is the gateway to answering many questions that emerge from the Torah text. For example, concerning the wise son and wicked son, "Why do the answers that the Haggadah instructs their father to tell them differ from the answers found in the Torah?" Regarding the simple son, "How do the father's words answer his son's question?" And for the child who does not know how to ask the questions, "Why must his father open a dialogue with him before he is knowledgeable enough to understand what his father is telling him?"

Rabbi Yehudah's well-known acronym **ש"ש בְּאֵחָב** takes on new meaning when seen through the lens of the Alshich's commentary. Although the Haggadah itself ignores the significance of the acronym, the Alshich shows how each of the three abbreviations represents a set of plagues with a common purpose and was designed to demonstrate to Pharaoh the truth of three fundamental principles about Hashem and His mastery over the entire universe.

THE GROSMAN EDITION

Rav Moshe Alshich did not write a commentary on the Haggadah itself. However, in 1767, a printer in Metz, Germany, Reb Moshe Zetzer of Rodelheim, published *Beis Chorin* ("House of the Free"), a Haggadah with three commentaries: *Gevuros Hashem* by the Maharal of Prague, *Olalos Efrayim* by Rav

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Efrayim of Lunschitz (author of *Kli Yakar*), and a compilation of all the Alshich's writings on the Torah verses that appear in the Haggadah. About a century and a half later, Rabbi Yehudah David Eisenstein published a Haggadah compendium comprising ten early commentaries, including a similar compilation of the Alshich's comments (New York, 1920; reprinted by Shiloh Publishers, Tel Aviv, 1984). More recently, Rabbi Mordechai Shimon Ohayon published an expanded version of the 1767 edition (Bnei Brak, 2013).

The **Grosman Edition** has been gleaned from all of these works, as well as from the Alshich's full Torah commentary. To the reader's distinct advantage, the Alshich's rather lengthy style has been condensed by the omission of tangential material and the focus of his comments has been narrowed to the text of the Haggadah. Nonetheless, the Alshich's explanations of isolated verses cited in the Haggadah often depend on the context of the verses that precede and/or follow them in the Torah, and such comments have been included in the Haggadah commentary as well. Thus, this Haggadah retains the original flavor and depth of the Alshich as it lists his major questions and presents the answers in an abridged, easily understandable form. For those who wish to delve into certain subjects in depth as they prepare for the Seder, a number of expanded essays have also been provided in the Appendix. The Alshich's comments on Hallel have been culled from his commentary on *Tehillim* (Psalms), but only the comments directly related to the Exodus have been included.

Pause on your journey through the Haggadah to savor the ethical and spiritual lessons that the Alshich derives from even the seemingly straightforward parts of the Seder that most people gloss over. See how the Haggadah can form the basis for a lifetime of constant self-improvement. Take advantage of the intellectual stimulation that this unique commentary provides

for your entire family. Pay careful attention to the themes the Alshich develops and to the methods he uses to read messages out of or into the Biblical text, for the beauty and complexity of his Torah commentary is to be found not only in his messages but also in how he derives them. The Alshich's sermons stirred the masses, raised their spirits, and inspired them with meaningful lessons. In our days, too, on this holy night of Pesach, may we all be inspired, uplifted and elevated by the Alshich Haggadah.

As *The Alshich Haggadah* joins *Alshich on Avos* on your bookshelf, we offer our heartfelt thanks to Hashem for allowing us to disseminate the unique Torah lessons taught by the Holy Alshich and pray to Hashem that He provide us with the opportunity to translate and elucidate the unique commentaries of Rav Moshe Alshich on the Chumash, אמרן ואמרן.