

# INTRODUCTION TO THE ALSHICH'S TORAH COMMENTARY

## *Why Should I Study the Alshich's Torah Commentary?*

Serious students of Torah have always been interested in increasing their Torah knowledge and in acquiring a *derech halimud*, a methodology in the techniques of Torah study. In the case of certain commentaries, reading or studying anthologies of their works will undoubtedly increase the reader's knowledge, but without necessarily advancing the student's ability to study Torah texts independently with depth and clarity. The commentary of the Alshich gives the reader superb training in improving textual analysis. By asking penetrating questions, the Alshich presents a master class in sensitivity to the most delicate nuances of language in any given text. When we study the Alshich's commentary, we learn that seemingly slight and subtle inferences can radically alter our understanding of the narrative, allowing us to find fascinating insights hidden beneath the literal meaning of Hashem's words. Thus we gain both inspiration and techniques for more fulfilling Torah study.

The knowledgeable reader will quickly recognize that a large number of the Alshich's questions have also been raised by earlier and later commentators. However, the Alshich differs from most other commentators who generally deal with one question at a time, without necessarily considering the whole paragraph in which they appear. The Alshich, on the other hand, usually groups a large number of verses together and presents a slew of questions before beginning to interpret those verses. What makes the Alshich unique is his simultaneous focus on the most subtle textual anomalies in the sacred text and on broader questions regarding the story line. He usually prefaces his answers by introducing us to a quote

from the Talmud, the Midrash, Kabbalah, or by stating an idea that originates from the genius of his creative mind. He then presents an often novel approach (a *mehalech*) that is based on his preface. Next, he demonstrates how the preface answers his first question, how that leads to an answer to the second question, etc., until he has explained all the textual anomalies and answered all the broader questions that he posed at the outset. Additionally, he often bolsters his approach by revealing a *gematria* hidden in the text, or even on occasion uses the way the Torah's musical notes (*trop*) are presented to prove his point. Ultimately, he unifies the entire passage into a meticulous and innovative interpretation of the verses.

Let us take as an example his approach to the story of the angels coming to Sedom to save Lot (*Bereishis* 19:1–5). The Alshich asks no fewer than nine questions on this passage that include: (1) textual inconsistency [when the angels left Avraham, the Torah calls them “men,” but when they arrived at Sedom, it calls them “angels”]; (2) the Torah's mention of seemingly unnecessary information or unimportant details [such as where Lot was sitting, and the fact that he approached the angels rather than waiting for them to come to him]; (3) the use of an unusual phrase [“turn aside to my house” instead of the simpler “come to my house”]; and (4) difficulties in the content of the story itself [how did Lot dare invite guests into his home when he knew that the Sodomite “justice” system had outlawed such invitations?].

Weaving his answers together in a seamless whole, the Alshich explains that Hashem wanted Lot to have the chance to perform the mitzvah of *hachnasas orchim* (welcoming guests) in order for him to earn sufficient merit to be saved. Now, Lot was sitting at the gate because he'd just been appointed as a judge, and many people were present there, near the courts of law. However, it would be unsafe for him to be observed inviting guests. The text then stresses that the angels, who had come in the guise of human beings, now reverted to their angelic forms, which made them invisible to all the people except Lot. Lot wanted to host the angels, but he was apprehensive that, if he waited for them to come to him, people

would see and hear him speak to [what appeared to be] nobody, and get suspicious. He therefore went quickly to them, before they reached the crowds. He told them that since they were angels, there would be no need to guide them to his home — potentially endangering them or him — because they could simply “turn aside” and instantly get to his house. However, it was not safe after all, because the neighbors heard the angels talking in Lot’s home and suspected that there were guests there. Since they couldn’t see anyone, they did not enter the house but rather surrounded it to prevent any possible escape, and then called to Lot to bring the men out to them.

### ***Other Distinguishing Features***

The textual features that attract the Alshich’s attention include switches from singular to plural mode or vice versa in the middle of a verse or paragraph. He demonstrates that there is good reason for each such seemingly incongruous change.

Another apparent anomaly the Alshich deals with is the use of the word **לֵאמֹר** (“to say”), which can appear open-ended, either with no apparent message or with no one to whom the message in the verse can be relayed. The Alshich explains both the meaning of each **לֵאמֹר** and how it is an important component of the passage in which it appears.

The Alshich also teaches why the Torah sometimes juxtaposes seemingly unrelated passages and shows how they are conceptually connected, thus justifying their juxtaposition.

### ***The Coexistence of Peshat, Derash, Remez, and Sod***

Many readers encounter a surprise when they study the Alshich’s commentary for the first time and soon realize that it combines different approaches to Torah understanding. His unique style demonstrates how, at one and the same time, a passage can be explained on a wide range of levels and dimensions. The Alshich is a master of the different dimensions to Torah study; *peshat* [the literal reading of the text], *derash* [the expounded meaning], *remez* [allusions hidden within the text], and *sod* [esoteric or mystical interpretation]. While

he most often uses *peshat* and *derash*, the Alshich also explains the text through *remez* with brilliant, innovative *gematriyos*, and through *sod*, using Kabbalistic interpretations. Occasionally, he expounds on fields of knowledge where most commentaries fear to tread. Thus, he will sometimes tackle one of the cryptic marginal notes known collectively as the Masorah,<sup>1</sup> which appear on most verses in Tanach. These terse Masoretic notes are generally viewed as instructions for scribes who write Torah scrolls; but a small number of commentaries<sup>2</sup> and *Mekubalim* treat them as cryptic teachings that bind together verses or phrases from otherwise unrelated passages.

Studying the Torah in this manner can perhaps be compared to using a microscope to examine a simple glass of water. Without the microscope, all we see is water. But as we increase the magnification of the microscope, we see more and more organisms that live in the water. It is not the water that has changed, but only our vision of it. Similarly with Torah, which the Midrash compares to water,<sup>3</sup> we may suggest that, to the untrained eye, the Torah's verses read like plain sentences, composed of simple words. But when we observe them through the lenses of the Talmud, the Midrash, and the centuries of Torah scholars, those same words can be understood on ever deeper levels, revealing unexpected interpretations. Moreover, this applies equally to the layman who just scratches the surface level, and to the advanced student who thinks at a deeper, more sophisticated level. It takes a master commentator of the Alshich's stature to bring this out — showing the profound intentions of the Torah's phraseology.<sup>4</sup>

---

1. If you have never seen or heard of these notes, it is probably because they are rarely published. See Introduction to the Appendix for a full explanation.

2. Most notably the *Baal HaTurim*.

3. See *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 1:19, where the Midrash compares Torah to water in more than a dozen ways.

4. The reader should be aware that since most of the Alshich's interpretations are unique to him, our translation of the verses often differs from other well-known translations. This was done so that the translation should be in accord with the Alshich's understanding of the passage.

It might be said that *peshat* “reads the lines,” while *derash*, *remez*, and *sod* “read between the lines” — yet all these approaches emanate from Sinai. Again and again, throughout the Book of *Bereishis*, as well as the entire Torah, the Alshich shows us how to read the Torah “between the lines” on many different levels, none of which are mutually exclusive.

The familiarity which many readers and students already have with the narrative and text of the Book of *Bereishis* make it an excellent introduction to the style and methodology of the Alshich. Following the Alshich’s probing questions and astute analyses, we are given a stark contrast between the way we had previously understood the narrative and the new vistas revealed by his insights. Indeed, the Alshich transforms a seemingly simple account of events into a sophisticated and multi-faceted narrative, laden with meaning and nuances not immediately apparent from a superficial reading of the text. All told, it gives us a better and more intellectually satisfying understanding of the Torah.

### ***This Edition***

While the translators have endeavored to capture something of the flavor of the Alshich’s 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. Due to the subtleties of his method, a certain intellectual effort is sometimes required to understand how his commentary answers each particular question that he raises. The translators and editors of this English edition have spared no effort in their attempt to explain how the Alshich precisely answers each question. When it was felt that this could not be fully accomplished with a given question, the question was generally left out.

On occasion we have added our own questions to the Alshich’s; this was done when it was clear from the Alshich’s statements that he was addressing questions not included in his introductory list. This book does not include everything the Alshich wrote on *Sefer*

*Bereishis*. Some passages were very complex and did not lend themselves to clear elucidation. Others dealt with minute details that might not be regarded as interesting to the average reader. Finally, when the Alshich developed a number of approaches to a single passage, this book often presents only the most comprehensive.

We offer thanks to Hashem for enabling us to translate, edit, and publish this edition, and we pray that its success will mark the beginning of a long-overdue introduction of the Alshich's magnificent writings on the Torah to the English-speaking public.