

ALSHICH

INSIGHTS FOR THE SHABBOS TABLE

ספר שמות

פרשת שמות

SERIES 1: ISSUE 13

BNEI YISRAEL ARE LIKE GOLD TAKEN FROM A FURNACE

Chapter 1

1) These are the names of the sons of Yisrael who were coming to Egypt with Yaakov. Each man came together with his household.

א) וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם אֶת יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ.

7) Bnei Yisrael were fruitful and swarmed; they became numerous and they became strong – very, very much so; and the land became filled with them.

ז) וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ בְּמֵאדָּ מְאֹד וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם.

Consider the following questions:

1. Why does verse 1 mention Yaakov twice, first calling him "Yisrael" and then calling him "Yaakov"?
2. Why are there so many adjectives used in verse 7 to describe Bnei Yisrael's growth?

The reason Yaakov's descendants went down to Egypt was to purify them, through the suffering of the Egyptian exile, from the *zuhama* (spiritual pollution) that had entered mankind with the sin of Adam and Chava. The opening verse of *Shemos* refers to Yaakov first with the name "Yisrael" because this name indicates the highest level of holiness, and in their essence, Yaakov's children were indeed on that level. However, they still had an element of *zuhama* within them. Therefore, when the verse goes on to speak of how they came to Egypt (to remove that *zuhama*) it uses the name "Yaakov," hinting at the imperfection that still remained. [\[This answers Question 1.\]](#)

This will also help us explain why The Torah first states that *Bnei Yisrael were fruitful and swarmed*, with the latter, unusual term having an association with unclean creatures. This refers to the growth in number of those of Yaakov's descendants who would not be able to get rid of their contamination and would subsequently die in the Plague of Darkness. On the other hand, the expression "*were fruitful*" refers to those of his descendants who would become completely pure and merit to leave Egypt and receive the Torah. The continuation of the verse also makes a distinction between these two groups. "*They became numerous*" refers to the first, lesser group; "*they became strong*" refers to the second, holier group. Similarly, "*very, very much so*" refers to the first group; "*the land became filled with them*" refers to the second one. In this way, the Torah is hinting at the reason for the Egyptian exile: because there were two groups mixed together, they needed to descend into the cleansing fire of the iron furnace of Egypt to be purified of their dross. [\[This answers Question 2.\]](#)

The *Midrash Shochoer Tov* explains this idea further:

Tehillim 107:2 states, Those who God redeemed from the hand of the oppressor will say... R' Aivo said in the name of R' Yose ben Zimra: [This teaches that] just like a goldsmith reaches out with his hands and removes the gold from the furnace, so too God took Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt, as it says (*Devarim 4:20*),

God took you and brought you out of the iron furnace – out of Egypt.

Let us ask the following additional questions:

3. Why does the Midrash say that the goldsmith “**reaches out with his hands** and removes the gold from the furnace”? Isn’t it obvious that in order to remove the gold he must first reach out with his hands?
4. Why does it say that he reached out “*with his hands*,” and not “*with his hand*”? After all, the previous opinion in the Midrash had compared God’s salvation of the Jewish people to “a shepherd who uses his hand [in the singular] to remove a newborn animal from its mother’s womb.”
5. Why are the Jewish people compared to gold in the hands of a goldsmith?

A goldsmith has to have great expertise to know the exact moment that the gold reaches its most refined state and is to be removed from the smelting furnace. Furthermore, because gold is extremely valuable, he will personally reach out and take it from the smelting furnace with his own hands; he will not entrust this job to one of his workers, lest some spill and get lost. Similarly, God knew exactly when the purification process of the Jewish people was complete; and because of His great love for them, He personally took them out of Egypt and did not entrust this task to an angel. **[This answers Question 5.]**

In point of fact, it was not appropriate for God Himself to descend into the impurity of Egypt to redeem the Jewish people. He should have used one of His emissaries, one of His various legions of angels. It was only because He loved the Jewish people so much that He did not entrust this task to any of His servants. For this reason, the Midrash emphasizes that the goldsmith “reached out with his hands,” even though it would have been sufficient to say simply that he removed the gold from the furnace. It wanted to make clear that God Himself “reached out,” as it were, into the contamination of Egypt to save His beloved people. He did not want one precious soul to be lost, in the same way as the goldsmith does not want to lose one precious drop of his gold. **[This answers Question 3.]**

The Midrash specifically mentions that the goldsmith uses both his hands because this symbolizes that God used both the *middah of rachamim* (the Attribute of Mercy) – His right hand, as it were – and the *middah of din* (the Attribute of Strict Justice), His left hand, to bring the Jewish people out of Egypt. They were not saved solely because of God’s compassion and mercy, i.e., by His using only one hand, as the earlier opinion in the Mishnah had indicated. Even according to the measure of strict justice, the pure gold element of His people deserved to be saved in their own merit. **[This answers Question 4.]**

THE ALSHICH AND HIS COMMENTARY

The Alshich (1508–1600), was one of only five famous rabbis in Jewish history universally known by the title “HaKadosh” (the holy one). He served on the same Beis Din as Rabbi Yosef Caro, author of the Shulchan Aruch. The Alshich is most noted for his monumental Tanach commentary.

The Alshich uses his creative insight and encyclopaedic knowledge of Tanach, Talmud, and Midrash to weave together his profound interpretations. He simultaneously focuses on the text as well as the context of a series of verses by listing a range of questions and then answering them all with one or two concepts.

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