

# ALSHICH

## INSIGHTS FOR THE SHABBOS TABLE

ספר שמות

פרשת בא

SERIES 1: ISSUE 15

## WHY GOD HARDENED THE HEARTS OF PHARAOH & HIS SERVANTS

### Chapter 10

1) Hashem (י-ה-ו-ה) said to Moshe, "Go to Pharaoh because I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants in order to place these signs of Mine within him.

א) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כִּי־אֲנִי הִכְבַּדְתִּי אֶת־לִבּוֹ וְאֶת־לֵב עֲבָדָיו לְמַעַן שְׂתִי אֶתְתִּי אֱלֹה בְּקִרְבּוֹ.

2) "And so that you may relate in the ears of your son and your grandson that I made a mockery of Egypt and My signs that I placed among them, and you shall know that I am Hashem."

ב) וּלְמַעַן תִּסְפָּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֶךָ וּבְזֶרְעֶךָ אֵת אֲשֶׁר הִתְעַלְלֵתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־אֶתְתִּי אֲשֶׁר־שַׂמְתִּי בָּם וַיִּדְעֻתֶם כִּי־אֲנִי ה'.

### Consider the following questions:

1. Why does God need to tell Moshe that He has hardened Pharaoh's heart? He has already told him several times that He would do so.
2. Why does God use the more unusual expression, "to place these signs of Mine within him," rather than something like "to multiply My signs in the land of Egypt," as He had said earlier (*Shemos* 7:3)?
3. Why does God say, "**these** signs of Mine"? The word "these" normally refers to something that is visible to the speaker.
4. Why does God first say (in verse 1) that He would place His signs "*within him* (Pharaoh)" but then say (in verse 2) that He would place His signs "*among them*"?

During the plague of hail at the end of *Parashas Bo*, Pharaoh had expressed clear remorse and repentance, yet as soon as it stopped, not only did he harden his heart, but his servants hardened theirs as well. Moshe must have felt that there were only two possible ways of explaining Pharaoh's shift in thinking: Pharaoh had hardened his heart all by himself, or God had caused him to harden his heart. If Pharaoh had hardened his own heart, Moshe wondered what the point was of returning once more to such a strongminded individual, who would just sin more the more he was afflicted. But if it was God Who had caused this, then a truly troubling question emerges: how could God, the Righteous Judge, cause a person to harden his heart so that he sins and then punish him for it?! Moshe did not see any difficulty until now [with God's hardening Pharaoh's heart], because Pharaoh had not repented. But now that he had given honor to God and admitted (9:27), "*I have sinned, etc.*," how could God harden his heart and cause him to sin [and make him liable to further punishment], rather than stretch forth His hand to accept a penitent? Additionally, perhaps we can say that there is justification for God's causing him to sin, for Pharaoh had for such a long time hardened his own heart, as it states after the plague of frogs and of wild animals. But why should God now also cause the servants to harden their hearts, when until this point they had not sinned and had not hardened their own hearts?

In order to make things clear to Moshe, God told him (verse 1), “Go to Pharaoh, because he did not harden his own heart; rather, *I hardened his heart and the heart of his servants*. So do not abstain from going to him because you think he is strongminded and will never repent, for it is not so.” [This answers Question 1.] God continued, “Do not be shocked that I hardened his heart after he repented; I did it because he had not been truly contrite. Not only does he refuse to repent based on the plagues that are still to come, but even **these signs of Mine**, that were evident and “present” before Pharaoh because he already experienced them (which forced him to admit his mistake) did not cause him to repent truly. [This answers Question 3.] However, now, through the coming plagues, I will retroactively cause *these signs of Mine* (that he already experienced) to be placed ‘*within him*’ – that is, in his inner being (i.e., in such a way that he will truly repent).” [This answers Question 2.]

This is why God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. Verse 2 explains why He also hardened the hearts of his servants: “so that you may relate (תַּסְבֵּר) in the ears of your son ... and My signs.” Through the hardening of the hearts of all the Egyptians [and the subsequent punishments they would receive], the Jewish people would come to an understanding of a fundamental principle of Jewish faith, viz., that Hashem [י-ה-ו-ה], the Compassionate One, is also the God of Judgment. In this way, they would not make the mistake of thinking – if things went well for them when they sinned – that there was no Divine retribution in the world. They would know that sometimes what appears to be good is actually an expression of Divine punishment. In Egypt, for example, some livestock survived the wild beasts, then the animal sickness and then the hail – because otherwise those plagues would have had nothing to strike. For the Egyptians, the fact that there was some level of relief in each of these plagues caused them to harden their hearts and persist in their stubborn refusal to accept the reality of God’s absolute power. Instead of realizing that the relief was part of the Divine plan of retribution – that God’s acts of mercy can be part of harsh Divine judgment – they interpreted it as an indication that they could somehow escape God’s wrath. The Jewish people would also learn from this experience that the opposite holds true, that when they are righteous and yet they suffer, this suffering can actually be an expression of Divine compassion.

Since verse 2 gives the reason why God hardened the hearts of Pharaoh’s servants, it mentions the signs that He would place “among **them**,” in the plural. [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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