



# ALSHICH

## INSIGHTS FOR THE SHABBOS TABLE

ספר שמות

פרשת בא

SERIES 2: ISSUE 15

## WHY GOD HARDENED THE HEARTS OF PHAROAH AND HIS SERVANTS

### Chapter 9

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 (אתתי) within him.

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 (אתתי) that I placed among them, and you shall know that I am Hashem.”

א) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כִּי־אֲנִי הִכְבַּדְתִּי אֶת־לְבֹו וְאֶת־לֵב עֲבָדָיו לְמַעַן שְׁתִּי אֶתְתִּי אֵלָה בְּקִרְבּוֹ.

ב) וְלִמְעַן תִּסְפָּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֶךָ וּבְזֵרְבֵנְךָ אֵת אֲשֶׁר הִתְעַלְלֹתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־אֶתְתִּי אֲשֶׁר־שָׂמְתִי בָם וַיִּדְעֻתָם כִּי־אֲנִי ה'.

### Consider the following questions:

1. 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*)?
2. Why does God say, “**these** signs of Mine”? The word “these” normally refers to something that is visible to the speaker.
3. God concludes here by saying, “You shall know that I am Hashem.” Surely the Jewish people already knew this!

Before answering the questions, the following introduction is necessary.

There was something that Moshe was undoubtedly struggling to understand at this point in time. He had seen Pharaoh finally express clear feelings of remorse and repentance during the last plague, that of hail, having said (9:27–28 above), “*This time I have sinned. Hashem is the Righteous One; it is me and my people who are wicked.*” And yet soon after, Pharaoh went back to his old ways, as it says (9:34–35), *Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had stopped and he once again sinned – he hardened his heart, he and his servants... And he did not let Bnei Yisrael go.* In fact, this time it was even worse than before: until now, only Pharaoh had hardened his heart, but now his servants hardened their hearts 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 on his own, or God had caused him to harden his heart. If Pharaoh had hardened his own heart, Moshe wondered what the point was of returning again to such a strongminded individual, who would just sin more the more he was afflicted. What was the point of trying to awaken a block of wood? But if it was God Who had caused Pharaoh to harden his heart, 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, “*I have sinned, etc.*,” how could God cause him to sin and make him liable for further punishment, rather than stretch forth His hand to accept a penitent? 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. 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?

Let us now answer our questions.

When Hashem said He would “*place אתתי within [Pharaoh],*” the Sages (*Shemos Rabbah* 5:6 and 8:3) understood the word אתתי not as “My signs,” meaning the plagues, but as alternate meaning of the word אותות – “My letters.” This refers to the letters ע”ך דצ”ך עד”ש באח”ב that were engraved on Moshe’s staff. Following the Sages’ line of thought, we may interpret the word אתתי as referring to the letters of God’s Name י-ה-ו-ה – the Name which Pharaoh had refused to recognize when he said (*Shemos* 5:2), “*Who is Hashem [י-ה-ו-ה] that I should listen to Him?*” This would also explain why the verse says, אתתי אלה: Translating these words as **these letters of Mine**, the phrase connotes “these letters that are here before us” and may be understood as referring to the letters of God’s Name that are mentioned at the beginning of this verse (“**Hashem** [י-ה-ו-ה] said to Moshe...”).

God was telling Moshe, “I hardened Pharaoh’s heart because when he said, ‘*I have sinned. Hashem [י-ה-ו-ה] is the Righteous One,*’ it was not genuine. The letters of My Name, Hashem, which he uttered at that time, were not a concept he truly believed. This will not change until I *place these letters of Mine within him*, i.e., within his heart and being.” **[This answers Questions 1 and 2.]**

Verse 2 concludes with the words “*and you shall know that I am Hashem*” because even though the Jewish people knew Hashem, they still needed to have revealed to them a supremely important principle of *emunah*: 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. They would also know that the opposite holds true, that when they are righteous and yet they suffer, this suffering can actually be an expression of Divine mercy. This is the faith that a person needs to acquire in order not to come to sin. **[This answers Question 3.]**

It is through the hardening of the hearts of all the Egyptians – and the subsequent punishments they would receive – that the Jewish people would come to an understanding of this fundamental principle of Jewish faith.

### THE ALSHICH AND HIS COMMENTARY

The Alshich (1508 - 1600), was one of only five famous rabbis in Jewish history universally known by the title “HaKodosh” (the Holy one). He served on the same Beis Din as Rabbi Yosef Caro, author of the Shulchan Aruch. He simultaneously focuses on both the text as well as the context of a series of verses by listing a range of questions and then answering them all using one or two concepts.

These sheets are drawn from the Alshich on the Torah published by Feldheim and are in memory of Yental Bas Yitzchok, Mrs Jean Silkin. They seek to expand the spectrum of readers who can appreciate the Alshich’s true greatness.

Please call David Rose on 07833 938 734 for sponsorship opportunities.