

# ALSHICH

## INSIGHTS FOR THE SHABBOS TABLE

ספר שמות

פרשת משפטים

SERIES 2: ISSUE 18

### THE SEVERITY OF OPPRESSING THE DOWNTRODDEN

#### Chapter 22

**19)** *Whoever offers a sacrifice to false gods will be wiped out – only to Hashem alone [shall you offer sacrifices].*

(ט) זָבַח לְאֱלֹהִים יִחָרֵם בְּלִתי לֵה' לְבַדּוֹ.

**20)** *Do not oppress a convert and do not cause him distress, since you were converts in the land of Egypt.*

(כ) וְגַר לְאֶתְוֹנָה וְלֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ כִּי־גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם.

**21)** *Do not cause pain to any widow or orphan.*

(כא) כָּל־אֶלְמָנָה וְיָתוּם לֹא תַעֲנֹן.

**22)** *If you cause, cause (עֲנֶה תַעֲנֶה) him pain ... because if he cries out, cries out (צָעַק יִצְעַק) to Me, I will hear, will hear (שָׁמַע אֶשְׁמַע) his cry.*

(כב) אִם־עֲנֶה תַעֲנֶה אֹתוֹ כִּי אִם־צָעַק יִצְעַק אֵלַי שָׁמַע אֶשְׁמַע צָעַקְתּוֹ.

**23)** *My anger will blaze [against you] and I shall kill you by the sword, and your wives will be widows and your children will be orphans.*

(כג) וְחָרָה אַפִּי וְהָרַגְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בַּחֶרֶב וְהָיוּ נְשֵׁיכֶם אֶלְמָנוֹת וּבְנֵיכֶם יָתוּמִים.

#### Consider the following questions:

1. What is the connection between verses 19 and 20?
2. What is the connection between the law about not oppressing foreigners (verse 20) and the law about not causing pain to widows and orphans (verse 21)?
3. Why are all the verbs in verse 22 doubled: *cause, cause him pain* (עֲנֶה תַעֲנֶה), *cries out, cries out* (צָעַק יִצְעַק) and *I will hear, will hear* (שָׁמַע אֶשְׁמַע)?
4. The words “*If you cause, cause him pain*” seem redundant. Since verse 21 had said, *Do not cause pain to any widow or orphan*, verse 22 could have just continued, “*Because if they cry out...*”
5. Having told us (verse 23), “*I shall kill you by the sword,*” we already know that “*your wives will be widows and your children will be orphans.*” If so, what are these words coming to add?

Verse 20 states the prohibition of oppressing a convert using words. The connection to the preceding verse is as follows: Having just learned about the terrible sin of serving false gods, a person might think that it is permitted to denigrate a convert to Judaism by telling him, for example, “Not so long ago, you worshipped idols.” Therefore, Hashem tells us, “*Do not oppress a convert with words, and also make sure that you do not cause him distress in any way.*” After all, you were once in the land of Egypt where you served idols, and you also become converts to Me. Did I hold your idolatry against you? Did I refrain from giving you My holy Torah? Just as I did not hold it against you, so too you must not hold it against the convert. Someone who converts

is considered a brand-new being” (*Yevamos 22a*). **[This answers Question 1.]**

Verse 21 then states the prohibition of causing pain to a widow or an orphan. Having warned us regarding the convert that we are not to remind him of his past **evil**, because it will cause him distress, the Torah now warns us regarding the widow or orphan that we are even forbidden to do anything that will cause them to suffer by reminding them of the previous **good** they had enjoyed when their husband/father had been alive. If you oppress them, they will think to themselves, “Now this person is able to persecute me and threaten me, but if my husband/father were still alive, he would certainly have protected me. Alas! My loss is so hard to bear.” **[This answers Question 2.]**

But why did the Torah single out the prohibition of causing pain only to a widow and orphan? Surely it is forbidden to cause pain to anyone! The Torah therefore elaborates in the next verse why God singled them out: “*If you cause, cause him pain* (עֲנֵה תְעַנֶּה).” The double expression here (which would usually be translated as emphatic language, as in “**surely** cause [him pain]”) is coming to tell us that if you oppress a widow or an orphan you cause them double pain: (a) The pain that any oppressed person would feel; and (b) the extra pain caused by being reminded of their terrible loss, as mentioned above. **[This answers Question 4.]** So too, if the widow or orphan *cries out, cries out* (צָעַק יִצְעַק) to Hashem, it will be a double cry of pain: one cry due to the oppression itself and the second in misery over the loss of her husband, because, she would cry, “If only my husband were here, this person would dare not oppress me. Hashem, why did You take his life? Did he sin more than my evil oppressor?!” The orphan will cry out to Hashem in a similar way, bemoaning the loss of his father. The verse concludes, “*I [Hashem] will hear, will hear* (שָׁמַע אֶשְׁמָע) *their cry* – I will hear both of their cries: their cry for help from the actual oppression and their cry of anguish at being reminded of their terrible loss.” **[This answers Question 3.]**

For the sin of oppressing them, God declares that He will have the oppressor killed (verse 23). This punishment is also meted out even if the victims are not specifically widows or orphans, as it says: *Do not steal from a poor person because he is poor [and has no protectors]... because Hashem will take up their cause and take away the life of their oppressors* (Mishlei 22:22–23). For the sin of reminding a widow of the death of her husband after she had already forgotten the pain of her loss, our verse continues, *your wives will be widows*. This means that they remain “widows” forever, i.e., they will never be able to remarry. And for the sin of reminding the orphans of their orphaned status, the verse ends, *your children will be orphans* – i.e., the oppressors’ children will be permanently reminded of their orphaned status because they will not be allowed to divide up their father’s inheritance and will remain poor as a result. Both punishments will thus be *middah k’neged middah*. **[This answers Question 5.]**

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### 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.

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