

THE ALSHICH ON SEFER SHEMOS

Timeless wisdom on the Chumash by the Alshich Hakodesh

פרשת
בשלח

SAMPLE

Dedicated in memory of Mr Michael Wechsler & Mr Aron Chaim Pels z"l

י"ג שבט תשפ"ב

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An Adaptive translation by Rabbis Mordechai Rose & Nachum Spirn

THE PURPOSE OF TESTING THE JEWISH PEOPLE AT MARAH

Chapter 15, verses 22–25

22) Moshe made the Jewish people travel on from Yam Suf and they emerged into the desert of Shur. They walked for three days in the desert and they did not find water.

(כב) וַיֵּסַע מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם־סוּף וַיֵּצְאוּ אֶל־מִדְבַר־שׁוּר וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת־יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר וְלֹא־מָצְאוּ מַיִם.

23) They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water from Marah because it was bitter (מרים). Therefore, He called its name "Marah."

(כג) וַיָּבֹאוּ מְרִתָּהּ וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לְשׁוֹת מֵימֵי מְרִתָּהּ כִּי מָרִים הֵם עַל־כֵּן קָרָא־שְׁמָהּ מְרִיָּה

24) The people complained against Moshe saying, "What shall we drink?"

(כד) וַיִּלְנוּ הָעָם עַל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר מִה־נִּשְׁתָּהּ.

25) He [Moshe] cried out to Hashem and God instructed him about a [certain] tree.¹ He threw it into the water and the water became sweet. There, God placed (שם) statutes (חוק) and laws (משפטים) for them and there He tested them.

(כה) וַיִּצְעַק אֶל־ה' וַיֹּרְהוּ יְהוָה עֵץ וַיִּשְׁלֹךְ אֶל־הַמַּיִם וַיִּמְתְּקוּ הַמַּיִם שָׁם לֹא חוֹק וּמִשְׁפָּט וְשָׁם נִסָּהוּ

Consider the following questions:

1. Why did God make the Jewish people suffer by depriving them of water for three days? And once He arranged for them to find water, why present them with something undrinkable? The lack of drinking water led them to sin (by complaining) – why not just give them water from the start?
2. Why does it say (verse 25) God "placed" (שם) statutes and laws for them rather than "gave them statutes and laws"?
3. What is the connection between the beginning of verse 25 about sweetening the bitter waters and the end of it, which talks about God giving them statutes and laws?
4. The end of the verse states, "there He tested them." What exactly is the nature of this test?

In order to answer our questions, let us begin by looking at the words of our Sages² on the words, "There, God placed statutes (חוק) and laws (משפטים) for them": At Marah, Hashem gave them some parts of the Torah so that they could occupy themselves in studying them, namely the laws of Shabbos, Parah Adumah (חוק), and monetary laws (משפטים).³

¹ Translation follows the Alshich.

² Rashi on this verse (compare *Mechilta* here and *Sanhedrin* 56b).

³ חוק refers to a law that is not understandable to human reason, and our Sages understood it in our verse as referring to Parah Adumah which is a clear example of a חוק, as the Alshich will soon explain. By contrast, the word משפט refers to a law that is understandable to human reason. Our Sages understood the word משפט in our verse as referring to monetary laws.

Let us try and explain why God taught them these particular laws. There are two fundamental issues that could prevent the Jewish people from serving Hashem properly: (A) Their potential attitude to the *chukim* (חוקים), the statutes that are not understandable to the human intellect, such as the laws of Parah Adumah. They might ask themselves, “How will these laws help us, since they do not make any sense to us?” (B) The issue of the suffering of the righteous (צדיק וְרַע לוֹ). When they would see a *tzaddik* struck down in his righteousness, they might start to question God’s actions and potentially lose their portion in the World to Come. Therefore, on the first occasion that God gave the Jewish people statutes and laws (חוק ומשפּט), He wanted to remove these two potential stumbling blocks and help them understand the truth. While they were still righteous,⁴ He made them suffer by depriving them of water; and then, when they did find water, it was too bitter to drink. This was in order to test them by putting them in a situation of “the suffering of the righteous,” as will shortly be explained. **[This begins to answer Question 1.]**

After that He instructed Moshe about a certain sapling – the bitter wormwood tree⁵ – to use it to make the water sweet. This was a way of showing them the validity of His statutes: When the Torah states (at the end of verse 25), “There, God placed statutes and laws for them,” the juxtaposition of statutes and laws and the use of the unusual word “placed” are telling us that God wanted to place (i.e., instill) in their hearts that the seemingly illogical statutes (חוק) and the logical laws (משפּט) are equally important. The people should not be discouraged by the *chukim* and fail to observe them. **[This answers Question 2.]**

They would learn this lesson from seeing the bitter wormwood tree sweeten the bitter waters, defying the laws of nature in a way that was incomprehensible to human reason. Through this, they were to understand that Hashem’s ways are not the ways of man: What seems bitter and useless in their eyes is really good and positive, even though it is beyond their understanding. Therefore, the Torah says, God instructed him [Moshe] about a certain [bitter] tree. He threw it into the water and the water became sweet – even though the tree was bitter, the fact that God commanded its use made it a sweetening agent. Likewise, regarding everything that might seem bitter and strange in the *chukim* [mentioned next in the verse], the fact that they were instructed by God guarantees that they are sweet and good. Consequently, a person should have faith in God and take upon himself to fulfill all of His commandments, which are good and beneficial to him. **[This answers Question 3.]**

This lesson is particularly apparent in the case of Parah Adumah, the *קֹחַ* that God taught them at Marah. Just as God defied reason and sweetened bitter with bitter, so too the Parah Adumah defies reason, for its ashes purify the impure [person or object] on which

⁴The Jewish people had been elevated by their experiences in leaving Egypt and crossing *Yam Suf* and had not yet sinned. (Later they would sin with the Golden Calf, the Spies, the rebellion of Korach, etc.)

⁵ See *Shemos Rabbah* 23:3, which states that the tree of our passage was a bitter one, and cites different opinions as to what species it was. The *Alshich* writes that the tree was *לְעִנְיָה* (wormwood) and shows how it is alluded to in the words of the verse (via *roshei teivos* and *gematria*).

they are sprinkled, while simultaneously making impure the Kohen who is involved with the ashes.⁶ The lesson to be learned was that even though God's chukim are beyond our comprehension, they are all for the good, just as we can see in the logical laws (מִשְׁפָּטִים) that He commands us. Therefore, the Torah says, "There, God placed statutes and laws for them."

The verse concludes, "and there He tested them." God also wanted to make sure that when the Jewish people would be confronted by the suffering of the righteous, they would not have doubts about His control of the world. To accomplish this, God tested them at this time with the challenge of accepting what was happening to them. They were supposed to ask Moshe with full emunah why they were suffering, and he would explain to them as follows: Just as God made them suffer by first depriving them of water and then leading them to bitter, undrinkable water, so too He makes the righteous suffer in this world by depriving them of the good. [**This completes the answer to Question 1.**] The fact that the bitter wormwood sweetened the bitter waters served as a **metaphor** to teach them that each sin creates a bitter spiritual impurity which is cleansed by the bitterness of suffering. The suffering "sweetens" them and purifies them of the effects of sin – since there is no one who has not sinned, in their previous incarnation if not in their current one.⁷ Therefore, the Torah concludes, "and there He tested them," by bringing suffering upon them even though they were still tzaddikim. [**This answers Question 4.**]⁸

Because the Jewish people failed their test and complained about the lack of water (the suffering of their righteous selves), God sweetened the bitter waters specifically with a bitter wood, teaching them not to question the bitter suffering of the righteous for both are beyond human logic and understanding. They would now understand that the purpose of suffering is to sweeten the bitter effects of the yetzer hara and the sins of man.

⁶ See Bamidbar Ch. 19; Niddah 9a; Rambam, Hilchos Parah Adumah 5:1, 15:1.

⁷ As it states in Koheles 7:20, "For there is not a righteous person in the world who does good and does not sin".

⁸ While the waters becoming sweet served to teach the Jews about why the righteous suffer, that miracle was not the test (as assumed in Question 4). The test was their being forced to suffer (by not having water, and then by the water they found being bitter).

Who was the Alshich?

Rabbi Moshe Alshich (1508-1600), reverently referred to as Alshich HaKodosh (The Holy Alshich) was a dayan on the Tzefas beis din of Rabbi Yosef Caro, author of the Shulchan Aruch and early mentor of the Kabbalist Rabbi Chaim Vital, main disciple of the Arizal. Although the Alshich wrote many halachic responsa, he is most noted for this Tanach commentary, based primarily on his weekly Shabbos sermons. This monumental work has been hailed by more than four centuries of Torah scholars as one of the greatest expositions ever written on Scripture. In it he expounds on complicated passages, answering fundamental questions of faith and Jewish belief. The Alshich uses his creative insight and encyclopaedic knowledge of Tanach, Talmud and Midrash to weave together his profound interpretations.

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