

Elie Wiesel Rashi: The Greatness of Interpretation

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Elie Wiesel:

Rashi is celebrated and beloved to this day because his approach to what we now call textual analysis represents precision and clarity. And yet, one may safely say that his biography is not always precise and rarely clear. How is one to explain the mystery that surrounds some aspects of his life? We don't even know whether he is to be considered Ashkenazi or Sephardi. Not that it matters much.

His birthdate itself is subject for debate among scholars. Thousand-forty is the date that has traditionally been used. He was [00:01:00] born in the year 1040 of the common era. Why? Because that is the year when the great and famous *Rabbeinu Gershom Me'Or Hagolah*, *Rabbeinu Gershom*, the light of exile, passed away. And we believe, in the Jewish tradition, in the concept that no generation could sustain itself without a great teacher in its midst. When the sun sets, we are told, another sun must rise. So therefore, when *Rabbeinu Gershom* died, we knew -- we had to know -- that that was the year that Rashi was born.

We do, however, know the exact date of his death. July 13, 1105. In the Hebrew calendar, we know it was the 29th day of *Tammuz*, in the year [00:02:00] 4865 since creation. This piece of information was found in a manuscript, quoted by an Israeli scholar, Shimon Schwartzfuks, said it reads as follows, and I quote him, "The divine ark, the holy of holies, the great master Rabbeinu Shlomo, may the name of this just man be a blessing and protection for us all. Son of the holy Rabbi Yitzhak the French, Yitzchok haSarfati, was taken from us Thursday, the 29th day of *Tammuz* in the year 865 since the creation of the world. He was 65 years old when he was recalled to dwell in the celestial academy."

Where did he die? His grave has not been found. Where was he born? In Troyes or as we called it then, Troy? In Mainz? In Worms, perhaps? As is the case with [00:03:00] *l'havdil* Homer, whom seven Greek cities claim as citizen, though some scholars doubt his very existence, more than one city solicits the honor of having Rashi as his native son. Several legends circulated about his birth. It seems that his parents had in their possession a precious stone filled with rare light, which the church was eager to acquire for some ritual at any price. And the parents were offered huge sums of money, but they refused to sell the stone. They were told they could have anything they

desired. Faced with coercion and fearing temptation, they chose to throw the stone into the sea. And their reward: a son, whose light was even more glorious than that of the precious stone.

[00:04:00] It is said that his pregnant mother was walking in a narrow street when a carriage came from the opposite side and nearly crushed her. As she pressed her belly against the wall, we are told that the wall receded. And to this day, we are told, one can see the mysterious niche in the wall. (laughter)

Another legend maintains that his father Rabbi Itzhak was worried that he would not find the full *minyan* for the circumcision of his only son. He needed not worry. Prophet Elijah, or Abraham, or both, were happy to oblige. Only because of the son? Because of the father, too. If his contemporaries referred to him later as *HaKadosh*, the holy man, it means that [00:05:00] he died as a martyr of the faith.

Troyes, or Troy, had a Jewish community of a hundred or so families. That the child was precocious, is fact, not fiction. That we know. Still young, he left Troy and traveled to Mainz, in the Rhineland, where he studied with the three great teachers of the land. All disciples of the late Rabbeinu Gershom, who died the year when Rashi was born. And they gave him access to their notes, and through them, to Rabbeini Gershom's teaching.

It is difficult to imagine today the impact Rabbeinu Gershom had on his contemporaries. He was the *halachic* and spiritual authority in the diaspora. His word was law. [00:06:00] It is he who prohibited polygamy and the repudiation of a wife without her consent. He also forbade embarrassing a penitent by reminding him or her of his or her old sins. And, he forbade opening someone else's mail. (laughter) Really, speaking of the right of privacy, which today in the United States and in every democracy is so crucial. Already he, then, declared it as the law. The law being, what is private must remain private.

His life was shadowed by tragedy. His son was forced to convert [00:07:00] and the father sat *shiva* -- mourning -- but he never became bitter. His remarkable concern for other people's welfare was that of a true humanist. Rashi's principal teacher was Rabbi Yaakov ben Yakar. The other two were Rabbi Yitzhak Halevi and Rabbi Yitzhak, son of Rabbi Yehudah, whose headstone was recently discovered. It is now known that he, Rabbi Yehudah, died in the year 4824 since creation, which is 1063 or 64 in the Gregorian calendar. And so Rashi was a -- his disciple, near the end of his life. All three were great leaders of *yeshivot*, or Talmudic academies. In those happy times, *yeshivot* were small, [00:08:00] and located in the house

of the rabbi. So there was no fundraising (laughter) for the upkeep.

At the age of 25, Rashi returned to Troy, he married, and had three -- there are some sources that say he had four-- daughters, but no son, and accepted a position as rabbi and head of his own *yeshiva*. It sounds good. But not only did the rabbi teach without a salary -- at that time rabbis didn't get salaries -- but it was his responsibility to subsidize the school and the pupils, who came from all over France and the Rhineland to study under him. But Rashi could afford it. Was he wealthy? Did he get a good dowry? [00:09:00] Thanks to his vineyards, which in the province of Champagne were among the best. If -- there must have been kosher champagne, then, when he -- (laughter) -- but he must have lived comfortably.

But what about the dowry for his daughters? Miriam married Rabbi Yehudah ben Nathan and Yocheved married Rabbi Meir ben Shmuel. As for Rachel, her marriage with a certain Eliezer ended in divorce. Rachel, named for her beauty, was nicknamed Belle-Assez, which means "beautiful enough." Even today, there are certain names that we have taken from French and probably from Rashi's time. When you say *Yente*, *Yente* came from the word *gentille*. [00:10:00] When you say *Bayla*, *Bayla* came from the

word *belle*. So we have taken quite a few words, and thanks to Rashi, we know where they come from.

Rashi's grandchildren became his devoted students and influential tossofists, among them the Rashbam, and Rabbeinu Tam, who got his income from moneylending and money changing. The relationship between Rashi and the tossofists, the *Tosafot*, which are already a kind of commentary -- a corrective commentary on Rashi, are sometimes painful to someone who loves Rashi. Because occasionally you have the feeling the *Tosafot*, the body of work of those scholars who therefore were after Rashi, that they had only one thing in mind, to say, "Rashi made a mistake here, made a mistake there." But Rashi wasn't alive anymore, so we are sorry for him. Actually, he made very few mistakes. [00:11:00]

Rabbeinu Tam, his grandson, actually was too young to study with his grandfather. He was four years old when Rashi passed away. But in more ways than one, he may be included among his faithful disciples. He became known both for his scholarship and his daring decisions in matters of religious conduct. We know mainly of Rabbeinu Tam because he ordered that the men should wear two pairs of *tefillin* every day. So the first one is the regular *tefillin*, and the second one we call Rabbeinu Tam's

tefillin. Furthermore, for strange and unexplained reasons, he aroused the curiosity and sympathy of Yiddish folklorists. They were in love with Rabbeinu Tam. The famous, marvelous, romantic troubadour Itzhik Manger, [00:12:00] who wrote beautiful, beautiful poems in modern vernacular about the Bible, with humor and charm -- he wrote many lyrical poems about Rabbeinu Tam. It is impossible not to like Rabbeinu Tam.

Rashi was close to his students. He corresponded with them as well as with other masters. No letter remained unanswered. In matters of *responsa*, of deciding about religious decisions -- religious matters -- 334 of his decisions were recorded. One question that was put to him made me smile. "In a community that has only one synagogue, what is the *din*, what is the law if two *kohanim* both" -- [00:13:00] meaning priests, of the priestly dynasty -- "and both are *hattanim*, bridegrooms, and both want the first *Aliyah*. Who should get it?" (laughter) It makes me smile mainly for I cannot imagine a community with only one synagogue. (laughter) Maybe afterwards there were two.
(laughter)

In general, he sided with Hillel the Elder in the Talmud, whose moderation and tolerance appealed to him, and to me. In this respect, he followed the thinking of Rabbeinu Gershom,

especially in the case of victims of conversion. That question arose in 1097. King Henry came home from Italy and decreed that any Jew who during the Crusade [00:14:00] had been subjected to forced conversion must be allowed to return to his Jewish faith. Which was a nice thing to do from his viewpoint, but what about the Jewish one? Like Rabbeinu Gershom before him, Rashi allowed *anusim*, the forced converts to Christianity, to return to their Jewishness, and forbade anyone to remind them of their past. If the convert was a *Kohen*, Rashi ordered his priestly status be returned to him. Thus, on holidays, the former convert could bless the congregation. All that has been historically established.

But as happens frequently with admirers of great personalities, Rashi had his own hagiographers. P.R. is not so [00:15:00] new as one might think. Some imaginative, fervent, enthusiastic commentators maintain that Rashi traveled all over the world. That he visited the poet Rabbi Yehudah Halevi in Spain, that he met the Rambam Maimonides who was much later, that he also met the Duke of Prague in his castle, and that Godfrey of Bouillon, the leader of the Crusade, visited him before embarking on the Crusade to free Jerusalem. The reason for the royal visit? He wanted Rashi to predict his future. And Rashi did, according to legend. It was a bad one. (laughter)

His admirers were convinced that he spoke all the languages, mastered all the sciences, possessed [00:16:00] mystical powers, even ones enabling him to make himself invisible. Hasidic literature nourishes profound affection and tenderness for Rashi, whom they called der *heilige* Rashi, the saintly Rashi. They pretended his word was inspired by the *Shekhinah* herself. One Hasidic text goes as far as to claim that Rashi did not die a natural death, in fact, that he did not die at all, but like Prophet Elijah, ascended unto heaven alive. And that is why, they say, he was endowed with the *ruach ha-kodesh*, the divine spirit, when he wrote his texts. Said the Hasidic master Rabbi Yitzhak Isaac of Zidichov, I quote him, "When God, blessed be His name, put an end to Abraham's trial on Moriah, [00:17:00] and ordered him to spare his son, who was already bound to the altar, Abraham refused to listen to the angel, who had transmitted the divine order. He yielded only when God promised him that among his descendants would be a certain Shlomo, son of Isaac of Troy."

But Rashi had followers, not only in the Jewish scholarly community. Many Christian theologians fell under his influence as well. In his book on Rashi, the scholar Ezra Shereshevky writes that Nicholas de Lyre, a priest of the thirteenth and

fourteenth centuries, quotes him so often in his translation of the Bible that a certain Jean Mercier of the Royal College of Paris calls him *Simius Solomonis*, Shlomo's ape. [00:18:00] Through Nicholas de Lyre, Rashi influenced Luther, whose own translation of the Bible owes much to Rashi's, through Nicholas de Lyres.

Today, linguists study Rashi for different reasons. Thanks to him, they have the possibility of rediscovering ancient French words. For the same reason that Goethe studied Yiddish in order to understand the German of the fourteenth century, they studied Rashi to understand French of those of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The ones -- the words used by Rashi in his various commentaries -- what we call *be'la'az* -- number 3000. As for myself, believe it or not, [00:19:00] he helped me learn French. Without him, would I have known that *ashishit* in the Bible means lantern?

What do we owe Rashi? We owe him, above all, the fascinating and the indispensable art and pleasure of commentary. To comment on a given text means what? It means, first of all, to create intimacy between the text and the reader. As for me, before I comment on a text, I search its depths so as to see its transcendental mystery. In other words, in commenting on a

text, I abolish distances. Thus, between me and the world of Rabbi Akiva, or Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, or the Gaon of Vilna, there is a link. And it is incumbent upon me [00:20:00] to see that it blossoms. I read a sentence that was formulated on the other side of oceans and centuries, and in order to comment upon its original meaning, I approach it through other sentences that surface in Rashi's mind, and then in my own. And so Rashi's greatness is not only in his interpretation of text, but also in his conducting lively dialogues with the text and through the text, with the reader.

What is a dialogue? Dialogue implies mutual respect and does not mean forced consent or abdication of one side. It is, rather, an invitation to be open to listening to another view. Seeing another approach. Thus, the participant in the dialogue feels that [00:21:00] his words -- her words -- are not ridiculed. That the image he has of the world and of himself will not isolate him from other seekers of truth and warmth. Dialogue is a hand outstretched and taken. A manner of breaking one's solitude, in making him meet another solitary human being whose quest for meaning is reflected in our own. Didn't God create man and woman to dialogue with them? Isn't their dialogue man's comment on God's creation? To comment on a text, preferably an ancient text, is to know that though one is not

always capable of attaining truth, one may come closer to its source. It is to go back to the origins of a word that is rooted in [00:22:00] the revelation at Sinai.

Frequently, the Talmud uses the expression *Halacha L'Moshe MiSinai*, that is, the law and as it was enunciated by our teacher Moses at Sinai. Maimonides uses it as well. This formula is of a special quality, for it stops the debate. The moment we identify the genesis of a decision, we ought to be satisfied. A commentary turns, thus, into a process, which propels us into the past. Rashi does not use this *Halacha L'Moshe MiSinai*. Rashi explains, and takes you by your hand, or by your hair, and pulls you with him to the source.

Commentary in Hebrew is *perush*. But the word *lifrosh* also means to separate, to distinguish, to isolate. [00:23:00] It means to separate truths from what seems to be true, clarity from the complexity in which it is hiding. Find the substance inside the form. Discover the spark, eliminate the superfluous, push back obscurity. To comment is to redeem from exile a word or a notion that have been waiting inside the realm of time and the kingdom of memory. "When you pray," said Louis Finkelstein ז"ל, "you speak to God. When you study, God speaks to you." If study is discovery, commentary is adventure. I touch a text,

almost physically, and begin to dig into its recesses, and at every step, while peeling off layer after layer, I meet predecessors [00:24:00] that led the way. Do I dare go farther than they? Is it possible to go farther than they? Is it at all possible for a modern commentator to leave Rashi behind? No. And yet, any one of us is allowed to comment on Rashi's commentaries, so as to better understand the Biblical words or a Talmudic passage. And so the process of commentary will never end.

But how are we to know which interpretation is correct? It's simple. If it enriches memory, it is correct. If it distorts it, it isn't. In other words, an excess of imagination runs the risk of harming the original thought. To understand Isaiah, [00:25:00] the prophet, the prince of the prophets, I must look for him in the majestic, and often brutal, poetry of his public addresses. To receive Hillel's precepts, I must plunge into his lessons and remain loyal to them. Even in disagreeing with them, I must be loyal to the truths in them. As in everything else, the key word in commentary is loyalty. Rashi is great because he is forever loyal to the text before him, and before us, but he also tries to be kind to the people he writes about.

Here is an example of Rashi's marvelous ingenuity. In Genesis, [00:26:00] in the book of Genesis, Abraham and Sarah heard from an angel the good news that in spite of their very old age, they will have a son. Says the text, "Sarah laughed, thinking" -- the text says it -- "How can this happen to me, since my husband is old?" In the next sentence -- now it is God who is speaking. And turning to Abraham, God asks, "Tell me, Abraham, why did Sarah laugh? And why did she say, quote" -- God is quoting -- "'How can I give birth to a child, since I am [00:27:00] so old?' unquote." Now really, listen to Rashi's beautiful commentary. "God actually changed Sarah's words. Sarah did not say that she was old. No woman would say that." (laughter) "She said that Abraham is old. Why, then, did God change her line?" And the answer is, according to Rashi, "So as not to hurt Abraham's feelings." (laughter) "And so not to provoke family quarrels." Rashi has a sense of humor, and he never tries to let his erudition impress us. That is why I love Rashi. He does not show off the originality of his mind, [00:28:00] the richness of his knowledge.

To quote ancient sources, "I reconcile with their help a text with the context," is sufficient for him. He is envious neither of his predecessors nor his successors. The Hebrew word *kinah*, and *kanaut*, come from the same root. *Kinah* is jealousy, and

kanaut is fanaticism. Jealousy leads to fanaticism. Rashi was never envious. His thoughts would often be accompanied by credit to his, quote, "father and teacher," unquote. Or his "masters of the *yeshiva* in Mainz." He would say, "*shamati*, I heard from." He would say, "*kibalti*," [00:29:00] which means, "What I am going to say now I received from, I learned from." Or he would say, "*nireh li*," it seems to me that."

His commentary is never an end, but a beginning. An eternal beginning. It begs for more. Always, more. And we are supposed to give more, always more. And so, the reader, the student, becomes his associate. His accomplice. His fellow searcher. Together they go deeper and deeper into the secret workings of seemingly simple words. An illustration of his humility is given to us by his grandson, the famous Rashbam, who together with Shmaya served as his secretary, and this is what they said, "Rabbeinu Shlomo, my mother's father, [00:30:00] who has been the light of the diaspora, composed many commentaries on the Bible and the prophets. At times, he gave oral interpretations too . . . I, his grandson, talked with him about some of them. And he admitted that had he had enough time, he would have written them in a different spirit."

On occasion, in his own writings, he does not hesitate to admit that he doesn't know the answer to a question, or that he doesn't understand a Biblical passage, a Talmudic decision. Scholars have come up with more than 30 such instances. Twice in Genesis alone he admits, I quote him, "I do not know what to learn from this verse." In Leviticus he says, "The explanation for this escapes me." [00:31:00] In Numbers, he refers to four tribes and names only three, saying, "The fourth, I don't know." (laughter)

Another example. In the book of Genesis, chapter 28, verse five, the text tells us that "Isaac sent Jacob, who went to Paddan Aram, to Laban, son of Bethuel, the Aramean, the brother of Rebecca, the mother of Jacob and Esau." It is a long, convoluted sentence, which no student of creative writing should ever undertake. (laughter) And Rashi comments with genuine sincerity, I quote him, "I don't know," he says, "what the verse is telling us."

Now, the *Siftei Hachamim* comments on his commentary with tongue in cheek and says, [00:32:00] "There are those who wonder why Rashi felt the need to inform us that he doesn't know. If he doesn't know, let him keep quiet." (laughter) But Rashi believes in truth. If he doesn't know, he must say so. Oh, if

I knew what I don't know. (laughter) But in this case, if Rashi doesn't understand why the text repeats itself, he admits it. But at this stage in the narrative, doesn't everyone know, who reads the Bible, who Rebecca is? The question is valid. But what is the answer? Must there be one? Now you get one more reason for my boundless affection for the man. Like him, I do believe that some questions are more important than their answers. [00:33:00]

Also, I remember as a child, in *cheder*, it would delight me to stumble on one of Rashi's confessions, for then I could avoid the *melamed's* nudging by saying, "Teacher, if Rashi doesn't know, do you expect me to know?" (laughter) In truth, it is with a sense of wonder that I study Rashi's life and work. His output is so vast that one cannot help but be baffled. How did he manage to write so much about so many subjects? He wrote commentaries, letters, *piyyutim*, litanies. He gave classes, examined students, wrote or dictated replies. Were there no nudniks in Troy? (laughter)

And what about his family? He had to oversee the education of his three daughters. [00:34:00] We know that all three were learned. Who taught them if not he? We know that he was affectionate with them, and their mother. In general, in his

decisions, he often favored the woman. He helped the household at home. He also had to make a living, and put in long hours in his vineyards. After all, he didn't produce wine only for *Kiddush*. He had to sell it. When did he find time for business in a life so intensely devoted to study?

Furthermore, what about the Jewish problem? He must have been politically active, so to speak, in Jewish affairs. Was he? After all, things were happening in the world. Let's see the context. The new millennium announced itself with turbulence and trouble, [00:35:00] almost like today. Many wars raged in the name of spiritual and political conquest. Fanaticism was on the rise. Christendom and Islam continued their profound ideological conflict through territorial battles. Norway, Sweden, Burgundy, Spain, France. Too many kings wanted to rule over too many countries. Romanus III, the Byzantine emperor, added Syria to his list of victories. In Constantinople, the patriarch was excommunicated by Rome, thus marking the beginning of a lasting schism in Christianity between east and west. In Rome, Benedict, a corrupt and cruel man, was elected pope, only to be unseated and later reinstated. Eventually, he sold his title and position to Gregory VI, who will also be deposed.

In the Islamic world, [00:36:00] the Shiites and Sunnites are living in constant fear of and desire for bloodshed leading to supremacy. The battle of Hastings, the capture of the Byzantine emperor by the Turks. The authority and the appearance of anti-popes, Rome's efforts to limit and weaken the power of local princes, the excommunication of Emperor Henry IV by Pope Gregory VII, who forces him to come to his knees and ask for forgiveness in Canossa. The opening battles for the re-conquest of Spain from the Almoravid. The burning of Rome by the Norman troops of Robert Guiscard. The tumultuous reign of William the Conqueror. What a century that was. Ten years before it ended, Rashid ad-Din Sinan created a fanatical clandestine [00:37:00] society called the Assassins, which continues to this day. Simply its leaders handed down hit lists to its secret members, who were then as brutal and efficient as Hamas is today.

What about the Jewish scene? When non-Jews were busy fighting one another, they usually found time to vent their anger on Jews. Not so in the greater part of the eleventh century. Chronicles recorded no major catastrophe. Jews dwelt in relative peace. In Spain, for instance, Jews savored the fruits of the Golden Age, the great Shmuel HaNagid served as commander in chief of the Catholic king's armies, and played a major role in defeating the Muslims on various battlefields. Shlomo ibn

Gabirol and Yehudah Halevi [00:38:00] paved the way for Maimonides. Nothing special, meaning, nothing specially evil, happened to Jews in France and the Rhineland.

Of course, it was too good to last. For the Jews of western Europe, the eleventh century ended in terrifying events filled with fear, bloodshed, brutality, and death, all in the name of a man born Jewish whose dream was to allow love to penetrate the hearts of men everywhere. The Crusades. One cannot read the chronicles of those tragic times of religious hatred on one hand, and spiritual courage on the other, without feeling proud but heartbroken. It all began on November 27, 1095, [00:39:00] at Clermont-Ferrand in France, when Pope Urban II issued a call to all Christians to "Go to Jerusalem and free its holy sites from Muslim domination." Those who followed his appeal put crosses on their garments, thus being called the Crusaders.

At first, you see, the conflict was directed against Muslims, not Jews. But there were Jews who knew better. And Jewish communities in France dispatched emissaries to their sister communities in Mainz and Worms, warning them to prepare for trouble. Strangely enough, those communities in the Rhineland also sent messengers to the French Jews, warning them of the impending threats, [00:40:00] since the march began on their

territory. I cannot tell you enough how moved one is when one reads these stories, how the communities felt for one another. The solidarity of spirit and destiny that prevailed in their relationships. They didn't think of themselves, they thought of the others. Always of the other communities.

Eventually, the warning of the French Jews proved right. As the Crusaders began their journey along the Rhine and the Danube, they inflicted suffering and agony and humiliation upon thousands of Jews in Cologne, Mainz, Worms, and Speyer, trying to convert them by force. In some places, they were met with armed Jewish resistance. In others, the majority of Jews chose martyrdom. The first to prefer [00:41:00] voluntary death to conversion was a woman. Others followed. The tales of their heroic deeds make unbearable reading. In the courtyards of synagogues, men recited the blessing of slaughter, *al hashechita*, before knifing their wives, then their children, and then themselves. In some places, the martyrs sang the *Aleinu leshabei'ach*, a hymn composed to the glory of God. "Accept baptism and you will live," the Crusaders repeatedly told their tortured prisoners and victims. "We believe in God, the only God," men and women replied with their last breath.

There are stories of parents who sacrificed their daughters who were about [00:42:00] to get married, and of small children who tried to hide and were discovered, only to be sacrificed. The late Shalom Spiegel, whose work on the Akedah we quoted already, he brings a passage from Rabbi Eliezer bar Nathan's book on the disasters of 1096. "When the Crusaders entered the city of Mehr, a village on the Rhine, the local prince handed over the Jews to them. They slew some and forcibly converted others. A certain Shemaria bribed a bursar, who helped him flee with his wife and their three sons, and then he betrayed them. Shemaria and his family spent the night together. At one point, he girded himself, slaughtered his wife and their three sons, [00:43:00] then put the knife into himself. He fell unconscious but was still not dead. Next morning, when the enemy came upon him, they found him lying on the ground. 'Do you want to convert from your faith to ours? Do so and you will live.' And his answer was, 'God forbid that I should forswear the living God.' And so, the townspeople dug a grave and he, Rabbi Shemaria *HaKadosh*, the saint or the martyr, walked up and entered it himself. And then he took his three sons, and lay them to his left side, his wife to his right. And he was in the middle. And then the people began to throw earth into the grave. And all that day, till the next morning, Rabbi Shemaria *HaKadosh* sobbed [00:44:00] and wept over his fate, and that of

his wife, and his sons, lying beside him. Then the enemies of the Lord came back and removed him, still alive, from the grave, so that he might recant and confess his error. Again they asked him, 'Are you ready to give up your God?' But Rabbi Shemaria *HaKadosh* refused to barter the great and glorious for the cheap, and he held fast to his integrity till he drew his last breath. And so they put him into the grave a second time, and threw earth upon him, and there, the saint died for the unity of the glorious and awesome name. And there he remained steadfast in his trial, like Father Abraham, oh how fortunate he was. Oh, his fortunate lot." [00:45:00] End of quote.

Why did so many of them in the Rhine provinces choose martyrdom, whereas in Sephardi lands, during the Jihad, their brothers and sisters did not? Read Gershon Cohen's essay on this question, you will be rewarded. I will not reveal his answer since it is not related to Rashi, but the Crusades are. When the Crusaders, led by Godfrey of Bouillon, finally reached Jerusalem, they ransacked the city and brutalized its inhabitants. Jews and Muslims combined their forces and fought them with great vigor, but were outnumbered. The Crusaders locked a group of Karaites and Jews in a synagogue and set it on fire. [00:46:00] All were burned alive. Many *piyyutim* and litanies were composed to

remember those decrees and tragedies. They survived the centuries and are recited in many communities to this very day.

But, what did Rashi say about them? At the beginning of the First Crusade, Rashi is 55 years old. He has ten more years to live. And this is the mysterious part of Rashi's life and work. He has ten more years to live. Busy as always, he's more productive than ever. His creativity is boundless, he writes *kuntrasim*, pamphlets, answers questions related to *halacha*, and he continues his commentaries. [00:47:00] But how does he manage to go on studying and teaching? And writing? How does he manage? Is his power of concentration that strong, that he is able to think of nothing else? Of nothing that happens around him?

True, for some reasons, Troy and his family are unharmed. For some reasons, his community is intact and miraculously spared. There, tragedy struck many decades later. In 1288, an ugly trial of ritual murder of the Jewish dignitary, Yitzhak Châtelain, 13 Jews were burned alive. All died while sanctifying God's name. But in Rashi's time, Troy is quiet. [00:48:00] But Mainz and Worms, where he had been as a student, are not. And they are not that far away. Echoes of the massacres and scenes of martyrdom must have reached his

community. It is inconceivable that he was not informed. The fact is that in his law already quoted, later on he said that a forced convert can come back to the community. So he knew about it. There is proof that he knew.

In his commentaries on Psalms, on the *Tehillim*, he's unable to conceal his distress over the woes that befell our people in those Biblical times, thousands of years earlier. And it is clear to the reader, to me, that he means the tragedies that occurred in his time, not in the Biblical time. In some of his *selichot*, the penitential prayers, [00:49:00] he implores God, quote, "To gather in his cup the tears of his children," unquote. He also pleads with the Torah to intercede on behalf of those who give their lives for its glory. Are they related to the tragic events next door? I don't know.

I know that in 1096, illness caught up with him. He complained to his grandchildren and disciples and said, "I am so weak, I am too weak to tell you what I feel." His beautiful, moving, magnificent introduction to the Song of Songs is a moving appeal. Its aim is to bring comfort and consolation to his persecuted people. He says, "There are numerous readings of this text in the *Midrashic* sources, but I say," adds Rashi, [00:50:00] "that King Solomon foresaw the time when the people

of Israel will be deported from exile to exile, from one catastrophe to another. And they will lament while recording their past glory, and the love that made them different from others, and they will remember the promise God made them, and God," says Rashi, quoting prophetic verses, "will then reassure them, saying that He, too, remembers, and that their marriage is still in force. He has not sent them away, he has not repudiated them. Israel is still God's chosen, and he will return to Israel."

Does it make sense that Rashi turned to the Song of Songs, the *Shir ha-Shirim*, so late in his life? And this is actually a question [00:51:00] which I have already raised in the very beginning, and to me remained unanswered, at least not adequately. What did Rashi compose first? His commentary on the Talmud, or his commentary on the scripture? Conventional wisdom wants us to believe that the Torah came first, just as it did at Sinai. Without the Bible, there would be no Talmud. Furthermore, Rashi succeeded in finishing his work on Torah, but not on the Talmud, whose commentary remains incomplete. His disciples picked up where he left off. The expression, "*kan niftar rabbeinu*, at this precise moment our master died," or "*kan hifsik rabbeinu*, here at this precise point our master

interrupted his work," appears three times in the Talmud, in his commentary on the Talmud.

In Baba Batra page 29, the text says, quote, [00:52:00] "What precedes was the commentary of Rashi. What follows is that of his grandson the Rashbam," unquote. In the Pizarro edition, the note is more explicit: "Here, Rashi passed away." In the treatise of Makot, page 19, the flow of the text is brutally interrupted. Quote, "Our master who lived and died with his body and soul pure stopped his work here, at this precise point. From now on, it is his disciple Rabbi Yehudah ben Nathan who speaks," unquote. In *Pesachim*, the interruption is shorter and more obscure: "This is the commentary of Rabbeinu Shmuel, Rashi's disciple."

Nothing of this kind exists in Rashi's commentary on scripture, so we must conclude that his work on the Talmud came later, since it includes words about his death. But is it a valid [00:53:00] argument? Not really. It is quite possible that Rashi interrupted his work three times. But not that he died three times. In other words, it is conceivable that he worked on several treatises at once, and even on both projects at the same time.

If I could rely on my intuition as a novelist, not as a scholar, which I am not, I would say that he commented first on the Talmud, and on scripture only later on, during the Crusades. On what do I base my intuitive approach? His commentary on Genesis begins, as we have already said, "Amar Rabbi Itzhak?" "Why does the Torah begin with the story of creation? Because, as we said earlier, in the beginning, one day people will say to Israel, 'This land is not yours.' [00:54:00] And then, we will say, 'What do you mean? Everything belongs to God, and God gave it to us. First to you, took it back, gave it to us. It's ours.'" But again, is it politics? No. I believe that Rashi did react to Jewish suffering during those terrible events of the Crusades. He wanted to tell them, "Look. Christians and Muslims, what are you doing? You kill each other, and us in the process, for a land which is not even yours. It won't help. You may do whatever you want, it won't be yours. It's ours. God gave it to us."

It was a kind of appeal that he issued to the Christians, and the Muslims: "Leave us alone. [00:55:00] For your sake, stop that war. For your sake." But was it enough? Is it enough for a poet to write poetry, when around him men and women endure tragedies? But then, what else could, should a poet do? May the same principle apply to Rashi. As a scholar, commentator,

and teacher, did he respond to the upheavals by continuing his work? If the answer is yes, some students may not be entirely satisfied with it.

From the purely personal and human viewpoint, how could he throw his intellectual energy into explanation of an obscure ancient word or sentence or law, while Jerusalem was ransacked? Its synagogues subdued to cinders, their worshippers tortured and shamed. But then, perhaps therein lies his greatness. From Rabbi Akiva we learn, as we do now, [00:56:00] we learn, we always will, that for us, Jews, there is no better refuge than Torah. Wasn't the *Mishnah* written during the national disasters, that shook Jewish history for three centuries? Rashi knew how to transcend the present by conferring upon it the indispensable dimension of timelessness.

Later, during pogroms and persecutions in houses of prayer and study, old teachers and their fervent disciples, with their last breath immersed themselves in the study of Talmud, while outside, a few steps away, excited hooligans throng with hate and blood, sharpen their knives and ready their forks. That was our way of handing down a message to future generations, "See, listen, and remember: the killers have done their job, and we

have done ours." The Crusaders [00:57:00] proclaimed the reign of death; Rashi celebrated the kingdom of life and of memory.

In conclusion, let's go back to the beginning. Vos zogt Rashi. What does Rashi say? Oh, as a child, yes, his round, cursive letters scared me more than the Biblical ones. They suggested a world that only adults could penetrate. And each time the teacher asked, "What does Rashi say?" I felt like answering, "I don't know what he says, for he never speaks personally to me." But I persevered, and soon I was filled with gratitude. When I failed to grasp the meaning of a problem or a word, I would look into his commentary and it was to me personally [00:58:00] that he now spoke. "Look here child, this way. Don't be afraid. All ideas must be communicated, therefore they can be communicated, if shared, put, phrased in simple words. You stumble upon difficulties? Some words are obstacles? Well, start again. We have time. It happened to me, too," says Rashi. "I started again." And I loved him. Oh, did I love him. I could not study without his help. Oh, naturally I have studied other commentaries: Abarbanel, ibn Ezra, Sforno, Or Hahayim, but Rashi's are different. They radiate friendship.

At times, I feel as if he had been sent into this world mainly to help Jewish children overcome their fear when confronting

ancient texts. Rashi, a celebration of faith, clarity, and knowledge. [00:59:00] It is above all a celebration of language. To both God and Israel, he says, remember the past. Remember the times when both worked together, Israel and God, to attain the same goal. The future of humankind itself, I believe, because Rashi believed, is rooted in our memory.

M:

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