

RASHI: A GIFT TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE

BY BEREL WEIN

This year marks the nine hundredth anniversary of the death of Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (who died on Tammuz 29, 4865 [July 13, 1105]), known throughout the centuries by the acronym Rashi. If there is anyone in Jewish life that has achieved immortality it is Rashi. He is the guiding hand, the gentle teacher, the unobtrusive commentator who simplifies and explains, and inspires all who study Torah. As my young grandson once asked me, “Zaidi, what Rashi did Rashi have when he studied?” One simply cannot imagine the Jewish world without Rashi’s contribution.

Rashi was born in Troyes, France, in 1040. Tradition holds that that he was a scion of the royal family of King David. At a young age, he went to the

tri-community of Speyers, Worms and Mainz to study at the great yeshivah founded by Rabbeinu Gershom Meor HaGolah. Rashi’s three main teachers

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there—Rabbi Yaakov ben Yakar, Rabbi Yitzchak HaLevi and Rabbi Yitzchak ben Yehudah (Hazakein)—were direct disciples of Rabbeinu Gershom himself.

Students in the yeshivah used to spend the month of Elul copying the tractates of the Talmud that were to be studied that year. It was there that Rashi acquired his amazing skill at speedwriting and his penchant for meticulously editing Talmudic texts.

The students recorded their teachers’ lectures in *Kuntrus Mainz*, the notebook of Mainz. This “notebook” eventually served as the basis for Rashi’s great commentary to the Talmud. In fact, Rashi published the first draft of his commentary to the Talmud (there were three) anonymously under the simple title *Kuntrus* (Preserved over the ages, the *Kuntrus* appears in incomplete form in the Vilna edition of the Talmud as the commentary of Rabbeinu Gershom.) In later generations, Rashi himself would be referred to as *Kuntrus*.

While yet in the yeshivah, Rashi married. Almost nothing is known about his wife, and it is believed that that she died at a young age, leaving Rashi a widower for many decades. Rashi had two daughters, Miriam and Yocheved. A popular legend claims that he had a third daughter, Rachel, who married a great scholar but later divorced him. However, most current scholars do not believe the legend to be true. Both of Rashi’s sons-in-law were noted Torah scholars (Miriam married Rabbi Yehudah ben Natan [Rivan], and

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Yocheved married Rabbi Meir ben Shmuel), and are quoted in Tosafot in numerous places in the Talmud. Rashi treated his daughters as sons, teaching them Torah and Talmud in an age when most women were illiterate. Rashi's daughters helped him transcribe his commentaries and even offered opinions on Torah and *halachah*.

Rashi was especially close to his grandsons. After Rashi's death, the eldest grandson, Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam), completed the third edition of his grandfather's commentary to some of the tractates of the Talmud. Rashi's youngest grandson, Rabbi Yaakov ben Meir (Rabbeinu Tam), was still a child when Rashi died, but was nevertheless profoundly influenced by him. The greatest of the Tosafists, Rabbeinu Tam, was at the same time an exacting critic of Rashi in many areas and his staunchest defender against the criticism of others. Rashi's family and descendents were known as "the house of Rashi," and in subsequent generations it was deemed a great honor to be associated with that "house."

Rashi was a vintner. Even a cursory review of his commentaries reveals his immense knowledge and curiosity regarding fields including agriculture, animal husbandry, tool making, commercial law and transactions, anatomy, botany, rudimentary medicine and mathematics.

Rashi was not only the greatest scholar of his time, he was a great holy man as well. In later generations he became known as Rashi HaKadosh—the holy Rashi. The conciseness, clarity and simplicity of his writings reflect the serenity, humility and simplicity of his own being. Untroubled by philosophic problems or intellectual doubts, Rashi had a simple, deep faith in God, a faith that helped him overcome the challenges of eleventh-century French Jewish life. His love of the Jewish people and humankind shine forth from his commentary. He never criticized others even when he disagreed with their explanations or decisions.

Cognizant of the terrible pressures

that the medieval Church placed on Jews to convert, Rashi repeats over and over in his writings that "a Jew who has sinned is still a Jew" (*Sefer Haorah*, pt. 2, sec. 130, p. 220; *ibid.*, sec. 116, p. 216; *Teshuvot Maimonit, Sefer Nashim*, sec. 29). He even welcomed former apostates back into the fold of Jewish life. He states:

In our exile we are not independent; we must engage in commerce with the non-Jewish society since our ... income is from them. And we are justly in fear of them [and cannot provoke them]. (Avodah Zarah 11b).

Despite the hostile Christian environment of his day, Rashi attempted to maintain cordial relations with the Christians and their clergy.

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Rashi objected to unnecessary stringencies in *halachah*. As he once wrote to his teacher Rabbi Yitzchak HaLevi:

My master, one should not go to great lengths to increase problems with the kashrut of meat and thereby cause monetary damage to Jews ... doing so will mean that there will never be any meat that is deemed kosher (Sefer Hapardes, sec. 228).

People who wished to fast two days in order to correctly observe Yom Kippur in the exile were chastised by Rashi: "A fool walks in the darkness," he states.

Rashi was reticent to decide halachic matters unilaterally. However, when there was an issue of *chillul Hashem*—the desecration of God's name—he was vocal. Especially when Rashi felt that women were being treat-

ed unfairly by their families in regard to matters such as inheritance or divorce, he rose to their defense. Rashi supported maintaining the customs of Israel, although he disparaged those traditions that brought divisiveness into the community. (See *Sefer Haorah*, pt. 2, sec. 38, p. 190; *ibid.*, sec. 1, p. 170.) He was a rock of stability for the community during a very trying time.

In 1096, towards the end of his life, Rashi witnessed the horrors of the First Crusade. His mentors and colleagues in Speyers, Worms and Mainz were slaughtered, and the great yeshivah of Rabbeinu Gershom was destroyed. Through the efforts of the local bishop, whom Rashi had befriended, the Jewish community of Troyes was spared the ravages of the Crusade. However, Rashi mourned the fate of French Jewry, correctly sensing that within two centuries it would cease to exist because of incessant pogroms and expulsions. After Rashi's death in 1105, the Jewish community in France began to decline, although descendants and students of the great commentator worked on completing his monumental teachings in France well into the thirteenth century.

Perhaps Rashi's greatest legacy is his commentary to *Chumash*—the Written Torah itself. Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, himself a noted Biblical commentator, rejected the commentaries of the French scholars and strongly criticized their works. Yet he made a reverent exception regarding Rashi and his commentary, calling Rashi "*parshandata*"—the great and unique commentator.

For some nine hundred years, Jews from early childhood to scholarly maturity have studied the Torah with Rashi's commentary with love, awe and faithfulness. Phrases in the commentary have entered the everyday language of Jews everywhere. Rashi's words and insights remain as fresh and as relevant today as they were on the day they were written. Rashi was, and is, God's gift to the Jewish people. 🕯