

## WHO REALLY WAS RASHI, ANYWAY?

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, Passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education, I'm Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Skirball Campus and your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast and our conversation with Eric Lawee, Eric Lawee is the Rabbi Asher Weiser Chair for Medieval Biblical Commentary Research and Professor of Bible at Bar-Ilan University, where he teaches the history of Jewish Biblical scholarship. He also directs Bar-Ilan's Institute for Jewish Bible interpretation. His book, Rashi's Commentary on the Torah Canonization and Resistance in the Reception of a Jewish classic won the 2019 Jewish Book Award in the category of scholarship. It was also a 2021 finalist for the Jordan Schnitzer book award in the category of medieval and early modern Jewish history and culture, Professor Lawee thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Eric Lawee: Pleasure to be here, thank you for having me.

JH: I'd like to begin with an introduction to our protagonist, Solomon Ben Isaac of Troyes commonly known by the acronym of his name Rashi, can you give us a 60 second bio on Rashi?

EL: I always like to start with a definition of his accomplishments that I heard from my teacher, Professor at Harvard University, the way he described that achievement was as follows, Rashi wrote the classic commentaries on the two classics of Judaism, and by that he meant the Bible, but especially the Torah and the Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud that great compendium of Rabbinic law and lore and either of those accomplishments certainly would have sufficed to ensure Rashi's enduring place in the annals of Jewish literature, but both of them together having been produced by a single human being, as I say, is really a larger than life achievement.

EL: Rashi is really the founder of a school of Jewish Learning in northern France, there had been Ashkenazi Jews in Germany, there had been great Rabbinic academies there where he

studied in his younger years, but he brought that learning to France that really put northern France on the map.

JH: And by way of context, we should add that we're speaking about 11th century France and he was a Rabbi, not only in the library, but also as a communal leader, pastor of sorts in ways that were, foundational for that community of which you spoke in northern Europe.

EL: Right now that's a very crucial addendum that as you say, he was not an ivory tower scholar detached from the concerns of world jury at the time and some of those concerns were quite daunting, Rashi dies in 1105 and that means that he lives the last years of his life in the shadow of the first crusade, which was launched in northern France and the great Jewish communities where Rashi had studied as a youth in the Rhineland in Germany are decimated, large numbers of Jews are killed some forcibly converted to Christianity so those are the types of very dire and pressing concerns that towards the end of his life at least, Rashi had to deal with issues like what happens if a person who was forcibly converted to Christianity and that wants to return to the Jewish community, do they have to convert to Judaism all over again, not simple questions to deal with, needless to say and Rashi is the one with the broad shoulders in northern France at least who has to deal with them.

JH: Yeah, broad shoulders indeed we might summarize him by saying he was the pinnacle of scholarship and a pioneer to boot when the stakes were really, really high, so let's begin with the seemingly all pervasive influence of Rashi's biblical commentary, you write, "in function, it matched the role of the now ever more inaccessible Targum." The Targum is the much older Aramaic translation of the Bible, which was part of the study curriculum of Learned Jews and in some ways, therefore what you're saying is that Rashi became for his generation a re-translator of the biblical text, is it fair to say that when Jews the world over read the Bible, and I might also say today even read the Bible, they're in fact reading the Bible as understood by Rashi, even if they're not specifically reading his commentary so deep is his influence.

EL: I think that was largely true for many centuries and it remains somewhat true in our own time, which is itself a sort of astounding fact that we could pause to ponder that somebody who lived, going on close to a millennium still has a shaping influence on the way that many Jews understand the Bible. And I think it's interesting also to reflect on what you suggested, which is sometimes even unconsciously so, which is to say that any of us, for example, have heard the story about Abraham as a youth rebelling against the culture in which he lives to embrace this wild and crazy new idea that he had called monotheism and so and so forth, is reading the Bible very much as you say through the eyes of a Midrashic tradition that admittedly pre-exists Rashi.

EL: But which Rashi makes forever more, I would call an indelible part of Jewish consciousness when they think of who Abraham was and what he stood for and that does become the pattern more and more, so much so that at a certain point there's actually a legal ruling in the Great Code of Jewish law, the Shulchan Arukh of Joseph Karo, which suggests that it's a requirement to prepare week in and week out when one comes to the synagogue in advance a private,

preparation of the weekly Torah reading by reading it twice in the original Hebrew and once with the commentary of Rashi.

JH: So we've established this Titanic towering figure of Jewish self understanding, it really goes far beyond even text, I wanna spend a minute to talk about the other side of this coin, which is not the influence after the fact, but the monumental work and act of writing such a commentary in the first place. Ink and parchment are expensive. Time, of course, is the ultimate commodity of anyone's life, and for someone to initiate an unprecedented project of a more or less, line-by-line commentary of scripture, one needs tremendous motivation, purpose. There has to be a reason to do this. What do you think motivated Rashi to write his biblical commentary, and why is that motivation so difficult for scholars today to suss out?

EL: Yeah, you certainly put your finger on a key point with your last observation, which is that, this is a question that has intrigued scholars. A lot of what Rashi was doing was organizing a vast amount of material according to a certain principle, and the question is, "What is that principle?" And here's what Rashi is really pioneering, he says, "It's true that there're all these Midrashic interpretations, but I'm interested, also, in a level of meaning of the Biblical texts that really is new," not new in the Jewish world, because it had been pioneered in other parts of the Jewish world, but it is new for the world of what we defined earlier as Ashkenaz literary, and it's something that he calls Pshuto Shel Mikra, it's sometimes translated as the Plain Sense of Scripture, it's sometimes translated as the contextual meaning.

EL: What it requires is attention to all sorts of things that the ancient Midrashic tradition almost flagrantly, sometimes blatantly, ignored. What is the larger context of a biblical verse? What is the syntax of that verse? What do we know about the grammar of the words in the verse? All the sorts of things that, let's perhaps use a loaded term, a more rational reader of the Torah and the rest of the Tanakh, the rest of the Hebrew Bible, might bring to bear when they're trying to figure out exactly what this text is telling us, and Rashi is the great pioneer of this new approach in northern France, and then the question becomes, your question, what exactly was the motivation for innovating in this quite bold manner, this new approach? It should be mentioned, right off the bat, that Rashi doesn't jettison Midrashic interpretations, far from it, one of the great peculiarities of his commentary is that, despite his interest in this new approach, which was called Pshuto Shel Mikra, the contextual approach, and so on, he mostly sticks with various Midrashic interpretations, but with a high degree of selectivity.

EL: So you have, on the one hand, a new interest in plain sense, on the other hand, you have a new criterion for choosing certain Midrashim and leaving others on the cutting room floor, and the question is, what motivated Rashi? Some people say that he got wind of some developments along these lines from the Sparta tradition, and we know that that's certainly true, that the more grammatical approach that had been developed in the so-called Golden Age of Jewish learning, in Muslim Spain, was something that Rashi was partially aware of, he wasn't fully aware of it because most of that material was written in Arabic, a language he didn't understand, but some of it was written in Hebrew, and he uses those resources.

EL: Some have argued that it actually came from the larger Christian milieu in which he lived, and certain developments in Christendom of his day, which led Christian interpreters to approach their scriptural tradition along lines that I just described. Rashi is not somebody who tells us, in any explicit way, exactly what motivates this project, so I think we have to remain with a certain amount of indeterminacy, in terms of what motivated the approach, but you're certainly quite right that Rashi took it upon himself with gusto and the results proved themselves, in terms of, at least, the popularity with which they were embraced by different segments of the Jewish world.

JH: Would you be willing to hazard a definition for us of Peshat and Derash, with an understanding, as you say, that they bleed into one another, even though they often appear as if poles on opposite sides of a spectrum?

EL: I will hazard a definition, by way of an example that I learned from one of my senior colleagues at Bar-Ilan, one of the founders of the Department of Bible there, Professor Uriel Simon, and he tells an invented story about a girl who got off a bus and was injured as a result of a car driving by, and he says, "If a policeman arrives on the scene, the policeman wants to find out what happened." What did the bus driver do, what did the girl do? Was she perhaps not paying attention 'cause she was holding a cell phone? All sorts of facts on the ground that will determine, among other things, who's culpable, legally. But what happens if this grandfather is hearing the hourly news, and hears about this story, and thinks, understandably, about his own granddaughter, and wants to make sure, God forbid, that something doesn't happen to her, in a similar situation, he may say to her, "Well, you know what I heard on the news? I heard about a girl, and she was so busy with her smartphone that she wasn't paying attention, and she got off the bus, and as a result, she was injured."

EL: The grandfather doesn't necessarily know all these details, and the point Professor Simon wishes to make, is that, for the grandfather, it's really not that important if he has to invent or embellish the story a little bit, because his goal is not the same as the policeman. We want policemen who are people who stick to the facts and only the facts. We want grandparents who are worried enough about their grandchildren to make sure that they get incentive to be careful when they're using their phones and getting off of buses, and so the Midrashist is somebody who is interested in communicating a message for the here and now, is Professor Simon's point, and the Peshatist, the Plain Sense interpreter, is someone who wants to know just the facts, as it were, and so, when it comes to scripture, the Plain Sense interpreter is someone who is going to try to limit how much you embellish, how much you infiltrate things from external sources that don't appear explicitly in the text.

EL: Someone who's going to stick to the rules of linguistics, genre and context in order to determine the simplest meaning of the text. Whereas the Midrashist is much more for a free form, much more imaginative. And will look at this word or even this letter and build all sorts of elaborate understandings of the biblical text. And so, we have in Rashi a combination of plain

sense interpretations. We often estimate that they occupy something like a quarter of his commentary, at least on the Torah, perhaps slightly more in the rest of the biblical books that he interpreted, which is almost the rest of the Bible. And then we have something like, we estimate 75% of interpretations, which are Midrashic interpretations. Often Rashi does try to choose ones which are close to the plain sense, but many of them seem to be very remote from the plain sense.

EL: Just like that grandfather who added all sorts of elaborate details that would make you say, "Wait a second, how does he know that?" And the answer is there might not be much to build on, but they do communicate an important message. And that's what turns Rashi from not someone who is interested just in commenting on the Bible or interpreting the Bible, but also in terms of educating the Jewish people about all the things that he thought were important, the love of the land of Israel, a relationship between human beings and a relationship between the human being and God, how miracles happen and so on and so forth. And so we sometimes nowadays speak of Rashi as someone who wears multiple hats, both the hat of the commentator trying to explain a text, but also the hat of the educator trying to educate his people and sometimes inspire his people. Just as any good rabbi will do it at a Saturday morning sermon, a Shabbat sermon in the synagogue.

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JH: Let's follow this Educatorial role that you cite in relation to Rashi by picking up on someone whom you cite in your book, the late great Nechama Leibowitz one of the really great teachers of Torah in the 20th century. And she canonized an approach to Rashi by asking what is the difficulty that Rashi is trying to tackle in any given comment? This was the way Nechama Leibowitz organized classes and correspondence courses about reading Rashi on a line by line or verse by verse basis and working through them. What's proverbially bothering Rashi? Why did Rashi bother to spill the ink on this particular question when Rashi could have easily just moved on to the next verse or what have you.

JH: Behind that question, I wanna ask you if there might be something lurking, some suspicion or fear on Rashi's part. That if left untutored and unchurched a given student reading Torah as Peshat reading Torah contextually, or in its plain sense fashion. That there is a risk that even a

well intentioned student could in fact be led astray from Judaism by Torah itself. That there's room for misunderstanding at even the contextual level and that Rashi's educatorial mission is to harness the natural inclination to read a text with the grain, but also to massage and to make sure that the student does indeed arrive at the greater Jewish religious and moral questions that suit the tradition as Rashi understands it. Is that a possibility in understanding Rashi's motivation?

EL: Yeah, I think it is not only a possibility, but in some measure a probability, I think we could address the question historically and somewhat historically. Historically, Rashi is writing in the Middle Ages, as I've already mentioned. This is a time when Jews are everywhere, a tiny minority either living under the crescent or the cross as we say, which is to say under the rule of Muslims or Christians, for Rashi the more relevant ruling power was the world of European Christendom. And so even where there wasn't explicit pressure on Jews to convert to Christianity there is inevitably, as any minority is likely to experience a strong pull to assimilate, especially if you're living in the Middle Ages, when being part of the majority in a group offers all sorts of benefits and which frees you from all sorts of elements of subservience that you experience as a minority.

EL: So the idea that we already mentioned... You mentioned really, which is that Rashi is not just an ivory tower scholar and that he's a communal leader extends to the necessity sometimes to buttress faith among, Jews who might waiver. And to the degree that there were elements of the plain sense of the Bible that perhaps might lead in problematic directions. That is something Rashi is certainly eager to address. I'll just give you one example along those lines from the opening chapter of Genesis that God says...

[foreign language]

EL: Let us make man in our image and people puzzle over the fact that it's the first person plural. Shouldn't it say, let me, or let myself make man first human being in the divine image and this is something where Rashi is well aware of the fact that Christians will hone in on the plural and see this as justification for the Christian doctrine, Catholic doctrine of the Trinity. So that would be one example where the plain sense could be problematic and Rashi will address that in his commentary. But leaving aside the immediate historical surroundings in which Rashi works, traditional Judaism worked with what Jacob Neusner called the Dual Torah, the written Torah, and the so-called Oral Torah. All these elaborations of the biblical text that one finds in rabbinic literature, especially in the Talmud. And as I mentioned earlier, it's on this basis that Jews don't eat their lives. It's a...

[foreign language]

EL: Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Well, in order to do that, one thing you have to know is when the Sabbath day begins and when it ends. And that's not something that's specified in Torah and not in the 10 Commandments for that verse appears and not anywhere

else. And as I always tell my students, I think most of us, when we get up in the morning, we say, oh, the new day has begun. We don't tend to think of the new day beginning, the previous evening. So how do we know that that's when the Sabbath day begins in order to keep it however we keep it? So there was always this tension that was felt strongly and sometimes in places more than others, between the so-called written word, as you said, plain, unadorned read straight up, and the elaborations, which again provided the basis upon which Jewish life was lived. So part of what Rashi does is to lessen that tension and bridge the gap.

EL: And as you say, a way any suspicions that some Jews might have, that perhaps these are just inventions of some latter-day rabbis that actually don't express the divine will as it's encoded in the divine words. So from every point of view, Rashi's, Midrashic interpretations of things, I think are the ones that won him the greatest fame, and which proved to be the most enduring in the consciousness of ordinary Jews. The plain sense interpretations were something of a more elitist affair that were of interest to a certain stratum of Jewish scholars. But as you suggest, it was this bridging activity between the plain and adorned sense of the text, which could prove problematic for a variety of reasons. And the traditional Jewish reading of the text that Rashi managed to bridge so successfully.

JH: Let's revert for a moment to the theme of the grandeur of this undertaking and its profound influence. Sometimes we forget that works that we accept today as classics did not always enjoy that status. Maimonides for example, is perhaps best known among those who produced scholarly controversy in their lifetime and immediately after but who ended up being a classic. So to Rashi who had his detractors, who were these detractors and why did they reject Rashi?

EL: They ranged in terms of the specifics of what it is they found troubling about Rashi. But I would say, in general, some of the foci of what I called resistance to Rashi in the title of the book were one, the overly Midrashic approach, which I've stressed was I think highly appealing to Jews. But for a certain strand or stream of more of what's called rationalist Jewish biblical interpretation, Rashi set out to uncover the plain sense, and he failed miserably. But we have a comment of another famous Bible commentator from the Middle Ages who lives, not that long after Rashi, Abraham ibn Ezra.

EL: And represents really this sephardic school of plain sense interpretation. And he says in a very cutting way, really, that Rashi thought that he was uncovering the plain sense, but he only managed to do that one time in 1000. And now even if ibn Ezra said that as an exaggeration, curly, that is no compliment. And that was one objection that some scholars raised. This was true by the way, not just in circles outside of Ashkenazi, but even in Rashi's own family, there's a famous Bible commentary to our commentary at least written by his grandson. And he also basically says between the lines, fairly politely most of the time, but quite unequivocally, my grandfather set out to do something. He had the right idea in terms of execution. He left a lot to be desired, or at least he was then at an early stage of this process of uncovering the plain sense. And I'm now going to carry forward that project in a much more rigorous manner. So that was one objection. A second objection had to do with the whole question of what I'd call faith

and reason. And you mentioned Maimonides. Maimonides of course, is the great medieval Jewish spokesperson for the idea that somehow faith and reason have to be correlated.

EL: That we as Jews don't turn our back on the sciences. Judaism is not a faith that requires us to turn our back on demonstrated truths, in which case that poses all sorts of challenges for how to read classical texts, especially biblical texts. Rashi lived in the world of Ashkenazi, where as I like to tell my students, if you asked Rashi, what do you think of Aristotle? He would've presumably answered Who's Aristotle. He never would've heard the name, which was of course such a source of inspiration to Maimonides and a whole school of Jewish scholars living in Southern, Mediterranean centers of Jewish learning, who not only took Aristotle seriously, but as Maimonides say, thought, perhaps that he was the highest heights that a human being could achieve short of prophecy.

EL: And so for those types of scholars, the fact that Rashi attempted to unpack scriptural texts, absent any training in logic, absent any training in mathematics, absent any training in physics, absent any training in what was considered the highest form of scientific pursuit in the Middle Ages, metaphysics, that was simply scandalous. And it was a complete non-starter in terms of understanding the divine word, which they took to be congruent with science and had to be understood in white of what the Greco-Arabic scientific tradition taught. A third element which occurs in some texts of those who complained about Rashi is something I alluded to before, Rashi did inherit elements of the great leaps forward in the understanding of biblical Hebrew. Presumably the starting place for understanding any text, whether it's in Chinese and Italian and French, just to know the grammar of the language. How do French verbs work? And.

EL: How does, Italian syntax work? If you don't know those things, you're not gonna be a very successful reader of text in those languages. And so in Muslim Spain in particular based on developments that started in the Islamic East, there have been, tremendous new discoveries in the field of biblical Hebrew. That is to say they're writing about, how to understand biblical Hebrew, but they're writing in Arabic, which provided a rich scientific vocabulary for discussing linguistics. And, so Rashi inherits the part of that tradition that was composed in Hebrew. He does not inherit the much more sophisticated forms of Judeo Arabic grammatical discoveries that were composed only in Arabic. And so some scholars, note that Rashi was simply incapable of unpacking biblical Hebrew on the basis of the way to scientific findings about how it is one understands biblical Hebrew.

EL: So you have the complaint that Rashi's overly Midrashic Rashi didn't pursue Chartist agenda sufficiently. You have the complaint that Rashi is ignorant of sciences, and that's necessary ingredients in any successful grappling with the meaning of the biblical word. And you also have the charge that Rashi's grammar is inadequate to the task of fully understanding the biblical word because he doesn't know all the rules of the language in which it's written. So that's quite a panoply of pretty serious charges leveled against Rashi's commentary in different times and places emanating from parts of the Jewish world, which as I alluded to really come, from very different world of, education thought and training in non-Jewish sources.



JH: So having discussed the many complicated layers to Rashis biblical commentary, I'd like to ask you to round out this conversation by sharing with us the most surprising thing about Rashi that we need to know.

EL: Rashi had this surprising ability to speak to young and old, to men and women, to Jews, prior to the enlightenment and after the enlightenment, in ways that were continually challenging and refreshing to Jews in different times and places. And that really is an accomplishment. That element to me is really one that ought to astonish us. We take it Rashi very much for granted in many circles, but I think we should be genuinely surprised by that achievement.

JH: Well, Professor Eric Lawee, thank you so much for taking the time for the great conversation and engaging us with this incredible hero of Jewish thinking. It was really a pleasure.

EL: My pleasure was definitely mutual. So thanks for that.

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