

ELIE WIESEL

RASHI

The most humble and erudite of scholars, Rabbi Solomon Bar Isaac, better known as Rashi, pioneered a disarmingly simple approach to studying Jewish texts, the results of which have reverberated for centuries. Today, nearly a thousand years since Rashi's birth, it is impossible to conceive of studying the Torah without his commentary.

Elie Wiesel was no exception. "I loved him," Wiesel writes in this intimate biography of the medieval rabbi. "I couldn't make headway without him." Who was Rashi? What makes his commentary so influential and lasting? How does Rashi's work enable us to better understand Wiesel himself, and, by extension, the Jewish tradition? The following questions are intended to serve as a guide through Wiesel's account of Rashi's life and work.

Two Men, Two Worlds

"He said to me, as if confidentially: look my child; fear nothing..."
-Elie Wiesel

Wiesel paints a loving portrait of Rashi, one that pulses with feeling for a man who lived 900 years ago. What qualities drew Wiesel to Rashi? He writes: "Sometimes, in my small town, it seemed to me that Rashi had been sent to earth primarily to help Jewish children overcome loneliness. And fear." How might Rashi have helped Jewish children conquer their loneliness, and fear? What type of fear do you think Wiesel is referring to?

Wiesel recounts several legends surrounding the circumstances of Rashi's birth. What were these legends? How might they illuminate the values and beliefs of the Jewish community at the time?

Wiesel writes that "what counts most for Rashi is the concern for truth," adding that this objective can call for "a great deal of daring." How might such an approach become complicated for Rashi? What example from Rashi's work does Wiesel use as support?

Wiesel cites a Rashi biographer, Avraham Grossman, who contends that Rashi's great success was due not only to the brilliance of his commentaries, but to his character. What are some of the character traits he lists? Can you point to examples in Rashi's work that might serve as evidence of Grossman's argument?

Interpreting and Reinterpreting

"And he admitted to me that, if he had the time, he would revise his work taking into account explanations that are revealed day after day."
-Rashbam, on his grandfather Rashi

Biblical and Talmudic commentary was the great mode of Jewish expression for centuries. How did the destruction of the Temple pave the way for this form? What basic need did the Talmud and its commentary fill for a wandering people?

Wiesel offers multiple examples in which Rashi parses great meaning from seemingly tiny textual choices. (For example, when God reprimands Cain after killing Abel, the word "blood" appears in the plural form; Rashi explains the usage by pointing out that Cain has killed off not only his brother, but future generations as well.) What life lessons can be imparted from the act of reading so closely? How can the tradition of commentary, of taking nothing for granted, serve as a guide to living?

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"We need imagination to write about him," Wiesel says of Rashi. And while Wiesel admirably imagines the life Rashi led, he also doesn't shy away from posing numerous questions that he cannot answer, from basic biographical questions to larger Talmudic matters. As a reader, what was your reaction to the inclusion of such questions? How did Wiesel, in the writing of this book, enact the larger questions of commentary?

Wiesel points to numerous contradictions in Rashi's commentary. He also underscores that Rashi isn't afraid of saying he doesn't know. Do these qualities weaken Rashi's work in your eyes? Strengthen it? How?

Wiesel points out that the expression "here in this spot, our Teacher died" occurs in three different places in Rashi's Talmudic commentary. What does it say about Rashi that he died while at work, and about the tradition that it saw fit – on more than one occasion – to include his death as part of the body of his work, almost as if he were buried in it?

"Everything is inside them," Wiesel imagines Rashi advising a student. "Everything is waiting for you." Can you give any examples of how Rashi's commentary made a particularly difficult Talmudic passage more accessible to you?

The Law

For him the Law isn't impersonal and shouldn't be.
-Elie Wiesel

Wiesel writes that for Rashi, "the law involves human beings and therefore the human level should always be taken into account." How does Rashi incorporate the personal level into the law? Can you give specific examples?

In the story of Sodom, Rashi points to the verse "God decided to go down...and see." What is the meaning of this verse, as Rashi explains it? What judicial lessons can be imparted from it?

Wiesel asserts that the Talmudic law on ransoms is particularly meaningful. How so? What does the law say about the importance of teachers and the emphasis on learning in Jewish tradition?

Rashi finds larger meaning in why Joseph's brothers lied about their father's deathbed words. What is his explanation, and what Talmudic rule derives from it?

Do not learn the abominations of the other nations, the Torah says. Rashi adds, it is essential to understand these practices to guard against them. What examples does he cite in order to learn such lessons?

Israel: its People and its Land

"Rashi did everything he could to defend his people."
-Elie Wiesel

According to Wiesel, what does Rashi perceive as God's true suffering? Why?

Rashi believes that the "people of Israel live and act at the center of history of men and of nations." What is the biblical basis for this belief? Wiesel claims that this doesn't lead to a feeling of superiority, but singularity. How so? Do you agree?

Do you think it's true that Rashi did everything he could to defend the Jewish people? If so, how does this manifest itself in his work? What were some of the forces bearing down on Rashi and his contemporaries that might have made

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him feel an even stronger impulse to defend his people?

Rashi is “unambiguous about the rights of Jews to live in Israel,” Wiesel says, and he also suggests that it’s a sin for a Jew to live far from God’s promised land. What are examples from Rashi’s work that support this reading?

Wiesel places great importance on the question of why creation is placed at the beginning of the bible, and not the laws. What explanation does Rashi offer?

Rashi died more than 900 years before the founding of the modern state of Israel, and yet his emphasis on Palestine—and specifically the Jewish people’s right to that land—feels nearly prescient, or at least contemporary, at times. What evidence does Rashi give for why Palestine belongs to Israel? Is Wiesel consciously giving us a Zionist Rashi?

The Crusades

“Israel is still His wife and He will return to her.”

Rashi, in his introduction to the Song of Songs

When describing the period in which Rashi lived, Wiesel writes, “Jews in Europe and in the Holy Land lived in relative safety, which means in relative danger.” Can you elaborate? In what type of world might “relative safety” be viewed as “relative danger”?

Rashi’s own community of Troyes was spared during the Crusades, but other European towns that he knew well, such as Mainz and Worms, weren’t so lucky. How much did Rashi know of the atrocities? How did his anguish find its way into his work?

How does Rashi’s commentary on the Song of Songs reflect the suffering of Jews? What advice does Rashi offer on how to live in exile without capitulating?

Rashi asks, why was galbanum, with its bad odor, added to the incense of the Temple in Jerusalem? How might you better understand his response in light of the Crusades and the fate of those who converted?

The Holocaust

“Because I remember, I despair. Because I remember, I have the duty to reject despair.”

- Elie Wiesel

Wiesel’s life was irrevocably torn apart by war. He writes of studying Rashi as a young child, before the Holocaust, and as a grown man, living in its aftermath. How might Wiesel’s perspective on Rashi shifted or deepened as a result of his own life experiences?

Does the knowledge that the author of this book also wrote *Night* make you consider this text any differently? If so, how?

Wiesel doesn’t shy away from anger toward Christians in this account. Can you point to moments in the text where he wrestles with his outrage? Was Rashi able to help Wiesel remain a person of faith in a violent, suffering world? If so, how?