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Pentateuch with Rashi

Objectives of the Course

This course is an introduction to Rashi's commentary on the Torah. Although we will have occasion to consider the man and his works in the context of 11th–12th century northern France, our main emphasis will be on understanding Rashi's methodology in reading Scripture. We will read a variety of narrative, legal and poetic Biblical texts according to Rashi's commentary, and we will also have occasion to refer to other exegetes.

Requirements of the Course

1. Preparation for class, recitation and participation in class discussions [30% of final grade]. Students should prepare the assigned texts for each class, using the guidelines recommended in this syllabus (below).
2. Mid-term [20% of final grade]. The exam will consist of 1–2 texts to translate, with additional questions asked regarding each text. Details about the exam will be distributed one week prior to the test.
3. Written Assignment [20% of final grade]. Details will be distributed some time after the beginning of the semester.
4. Final exam [30% of final grade]. Although the exam will consist primarily of texts to translate, it will pertain also to historical and methodological concerns. A study guide for the final will be distributed towards the end of the semester.

How to Prepare a Comment of Rashi

For each comment of Rashi assigned, it is best to tackle it, step by step, according to the following plan:

- A. After checking the Scriptural context of the assigned verses, the student should carefully read the verse or part of the verse which Rashi is addressing.

B. The student should study the commentary with the aid of a dictionary, **אוצר ראשי**, **תיבות**, and any other tools, as necessary. Then, write out a translation. If there are words or even significant portions of sentences that you can't figure out, then just leave blank spaces — that's ok, even expected if you are a beginner.

C. After you have prepared a preliminary English translation of your own, you then (and only then!), you may go to a published English translation, if necessary (below, I list several of the popular and currently translations available for purchase).. However, don't go the translation first!

D. Look up, and write in the correct vocalization of, any Biblical verse which the commentator cites.

E. Try to answer the question, **“מה קשה לרש”**?. In other words, what difficulty, usually in the language of Scripture, is Rashi addressing in his comment? The answer to this question is never to “explain” Rashi in your own words, or offer a summary of his comment, or anything of the kind. It is almost always along the lines of, “Rashi is reacting to an apparently superfluous word in the verse”; or “Rashi is explaining the purpose of the prefixed-vav (or heh, or suffix, etc.) on such and such a word;” or “Rashi senses that the subject of this text (e.g., a mitzvah) has already been dealt with elsewhere.” You should practice answering this question in one sentence — really try to “zero in” on the specific issue he is addressing.

F. Practice reading the commentary aloud, and becoming familiar with the language. The more you do this, the better you will eventually feel about your command of the material. In “yeshiva Yiddishized-Hebrew,” this is called **khazzering** a text... which has nothing to do with pork (!), but comes from the Hebrew word **להחזור**, meaning to “return” or, in this context, “to review.”

- Try not to feel frustrated, especially at the beginning. Essentially, you are learning a new language, and as any who attempts to learn a new language knows, much patience is required. As your learning progresses, you may feel you can skip some of these steps; feel free to do this, according to your own judgment. But even when you are a “pro,” never skip: checking the context of the verse upon which Rashi is commenting; reading Rashi with an eye to answering the question **“מה קשה לרש”**?; looking up any verses that Rashi cites in his comment; reading the commentary aloud. I believe that when students are diligent in following these guidelines, especially in the first several months of studying Rashi's commentary, their progress is much more certain than if they try to take “shortcuts.”

Reading Material

Students are required to bring to each class:

1. A Hebrew Bible; I recommend the small Koren edition for the clarity of its typeface, its convenient size, and its low cost.
2. An edition of Rashi or Miqraot Gedolot and/or copies of the assigned commentaries for the day.

***Please note: no English Bibles or translations of commentaries may be brought to class. You must come into class prepared to read only from a relatively unmarked Hebrew text!

Recommended Editions

The best edition of Rashi's commentary on the Torah is that of Abraham Berliner (1866; the second edition of 1905 was frequently reprinted — but may still be currently out of print!). Another popular edition is published by Mossad Harav Kook, and was edited by Charles Chavel; like the Berliner edition, it is one volume, and does not contain the Biblical text. However, you may bring to class any one-volume edition of Rashi.

Some Additional, Helpful Tools

Bonchek, Avigdor. *What's Bothering Rashi: A Guide to In-Depth Analysis of his Torah Commentary: Bereishit*. Jerusalem, New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1997; *Shmos*, 1999; *Vayikra*, 2000; *Bemidbar*, 2001; *Devarim*, 2002.

Greenberg, Joseph E. *Foreign Words in the Bible Commentary of Rashi*. Jerusalem: n.d. A dictionary of the *laazim*, or Old French words, used in Rashi's commentaries.

English Translations:

1. Rosenbaum-Silberma edition. Originally published in 1929, but frequently reprinted. It has excellent notes and appendices (frequently presenting the position of the classic supercommentaries on Rashi). The English translation is a bit archaic, but easy enough to follow.
2. The "Artscroll" translation of Rashi. Presents a Hebrew text of Rashi, in so-called "Rashi script." Following this, it offers a running Hebrew-English version of Rashi, with explanatory

phrases in brackets. The page is a bit “busy” in my estimation, but many students find this edition very helpful.

3. The “Metsudoth” translation of Rashi. Like all Metsudoth publications, this version is interlinear, providing an English translation, line by line, opposite a Hebrew text of Rashi. Some students find this especially helpful, others find it tedious.

Students may prepare for class with English translations, either individually or with their *hevruta*. However, translations are best used as a “control,” to be consulted only after preparing your own translations. Otherwise, the translation becomes a crutch that will prevent you from every really learning how to prepare Rashi on your own.

Course Sessions:

Session #1 (January 20): Introduction to the Course

Reading (Read over next two sessions):

1. Pearl, Chaim. *Rashi*. London: Peter Halban, 1988, pp. 1–62.
2. Grossman, Avraham. “The School of Literal Exegesis in Northern France.” In *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation. Volume I: From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (Until 1500). Part 2: The Middle Ages*, ed. M. Saebo. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000. (The entire article runs from pp. 321-371, but for this course you “need” to read only pp. 323–346). This essay is condensed from Grossman’s major work in Hebrew, *The Early Sages in France*. The pages indicated provide the “state of the art” in historical scholarship about Rashi and will introduce students to Grossman’s understanding of the reasons for the development of contextual literary (or “peshat”) exegesis in northern France in the 11th–12th centuries.

Commentaries:

1. Exodus 19:1:

בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁלִישִׁי לְצֵאת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה בָּאוּ מִדְּבַר סִינַי:

פירוש רש"י: ביום הזה: בראש חודש. לא היה צריך לכתוב אלא ביום ההוא — מהו "ביום הזה"? שיהיו דברי תורה חדשים עליך כאלו היום נתנם.

2. Genesis 3:8 (see Proverbs 25:11):

יש מדרשי אגדה רבים, וכבר סדרום רבותינו על מכונום בבראשית רבה ובשאר מדרשים. ואני לא באתי אלא לפשוטו של מקרא, ולאגדה המיישבת דבר המקרא ושמעו, [לכר] דבור על אפניו.

Session #2 (January 27): Rashi's Methodology In His Own Words

Reading:

1. Sarah Kamin, "Rashi's Exegetical Categorization with Respect to the Distinction Between Peshat and Derash," *Immanuel* 11 [1980], pp. 16-32.
2. Edward L. Greenstein, "Sensitivity to Language in Rashi's Commentary on the Torah," *The Solomon Goldman Lectures*, Volume VI (1993), 51-71.

These essays constitute two somewhat similar, yet somewhat different understandings of Rashi's methodology. Each of them tries to account for the presence in Rashi's commentary both of peshuto shel mikra and midrashic material. Be able to articulate the major points of each essay. How do Kamin and Greenstein differ in their approach to the relationship of peshuto shel mikra and midrash in Rashi's commentary?

Commentaries:

1. Review Genesis 3:8 (you must have memorized the part of this comment, dealing with methodology, that we introduced at the first session!)
2. Genesis 8:7 ("ד"ה "עד יבשת המים"); Genesis 12:5 ("ד"ה "אשר עשו בחרן"); Genesis 33:20 (entire comment).

In addition to translating these selections, be able to answer the question: "מה קשה לרש"י? Also, attempt to articulate to yourself what Rashi considers to be the relationship is between peshuto shel mikra (i.e., his attempt to understand a contextual meaning of the passage) and midrash (the earlier, Rabbinic understanding) in these comments.

Session #3 (February 3): Rashi's Methodology (continued)

We will continue reading the assigned texts and secondary readings. Should time permit us to address additional texts, these will be:

Commentaries:

1. Genesis 4:8 (along with Bereshit Rabba Handout)
2. Exodus 2:6; 19:17 (“ד”ה “בתחתית ההר”); additional texts as announced.

Session #4 (February 10): Rashi’s Introduction to Genesis

Reading:

1. Tuitou, Elazar. “Rashi’s Commentary on Genesis 16 in the Context of Judeo-Christian Controversy,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 61 (1990): pp. 159–183.

Commentaries:

1. Genesis 1:1

Session #5 (February 17): Rashi’s Commentary on the Creation Narrative

Commentaries:

1. Genesis 1:2–6; 26–31
2. Genesis 2:1–4

Session #6 (February 24): Rashi on Narrative Texts in Genesis

Reading:

1. Mayer Gruber, “Introduction,” *Rashi’s Commentary on Psalms*. 18. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2004. The entire introduction is pp. 1–149; you must read at least 1–22; 52–63.

Commentary:

1. Genesis 6:9 (“ד”ה “בדורותיו” ו’את האלהים התאלך נח)
2. Genesis 21:1, 9
3. Genesis 20:13; 22:1–2

Session #7 (March 3): Mid-term; Catching Up (!)

March 10: No Class: Purim!

Session #8 (March 17): Rashi on Narrative Texts in ExodusRecommended Reading:

1. Michael Signer, "Rashi as Narrator," in *Rashi Et La Culture Juive En France Du Nord Au Moyen Âge*, edited by Gilbert Dahan, Gérard Nahon and Elie Nicolas. Paris-Louvain: E. Peeters, 1997, pp. 103-10.

Commentary:

1. Exodus 1:12; 6:9, 30; 31:18 ("ד"ה "ויתן על משה")

Session #9 (March 24): Exegesis of Legal PassagesRecommended Reading:

1. Touitou, Elazar. "Rashi and his School: The Exegesis on the Halakhic Part of the Pentateuch in the Context of the Judeo-Christian Controversy." In *Bar-Ilan Studies in History IV: Medieval Studies in Honour of Avrom Saltman*, eds. B.-S. Albert, Y. Friedman and S. Schwarzfuchs. Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1995, pp. 231–251.

Commentary:

1. Exodus 21:1–6, 12–13
 2. Exodus 23:2; 34:26
 3. Leviticus 25:1
 4. Deuteronomy 16:2, 7 ("ד"ה "ובשלת"), ("ד"ה 21:11 ; ("ששת ימים תאכל מצות"); ("ד"ה 8 "ולקחת לך לאשה"); ("רק עד ד"ה "ותלית אותו על עץ"); ("ד"ה 8–7, 22:5 ; ("כי תקנה בית חדש").

Session #10 (March 31): Exegesis of Legal Passages (continued)**Session #11** (April 7): Rashi on Poetic TextsReading:

1. Mayer Gruber, "Introduction," *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms*. 150–154
 2. Robert Harris, *Discerning Parallelism*, 35–47 [Handout]

Commentary:

1. Deuteronomy 32:7–8; 10 (“ד”: “ימצאהו בארץ מדבר”)
2. Numbers 23:7; 24:5
3. Genesis 49:5 (“ד”: “שמעון ולוי אחים”); 49:6
4. Exodus 15:6; compare Rashbam on the same text (photocopy from תורת חיים)
5. Exodus 15:1–2

Session #12 (April 21): Rashi on Poetic Texts (continued)

Session #13 (April 28): Review Session; Conclusion

Where to Go From Here? A Select Bibliography (in English)

Agus, I. A. “Rashi and His School.” In *The Dark Ages: Jews in Christian Europe*, ed. C. Roth. vol. 2, pp. 210–244. Ramat Gan: Jewish History Publications Ltd.-Rutgers University Press, 1966.

Banitt, Menahem. *Rashi: Interpreter of the Biblical Letter*. Tel Aviv: The Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies, 1985. An important study of the significance of Old French in Rashi’s commentaries.

Baron, Salo. “Rashi and the Community of Troyes.” In *Rashi Anniversary Volume*, ed. H. L. Ginsberg. New York: American Academy For Jewish Research, 1941.

Grabois, Aryeh. “The Hebraica Veritas and Jewish-Christian Intellectual Relations in the Twelfth Century.” *Speculum* 50 (1975), pp. 613–634.

Hailperin, Herman. *Rashi and the Christian Scholars*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963.

Shereshevsky, Esra. *Rashi: The Man and His World*. New York: Sefer Hermon Press, 1982. Read with the criticism of Van der Heide in mind!

Van der Heide, A. “Rashi's Biblical Exegesis.” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 41 (1984): pp. 292–318.