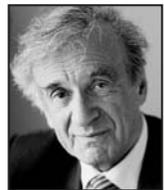


# Wiesel presents his Rashi

By Len Abrams

Special to the Advocate

Time-tested. The advertising industry was once fond of this stock epithet for dependable products. Nine hundred years after the sage's death, the commentaries of Rashi on the Talmud and on Torah have stood the test of time. The high place in Judaic scholarship of Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, better known as Rashi, is hardly challenged, his advice cherished by novices and experts, as guide and even friend. The traditional response of Talmud students, who've reached their limits in understanding a passage, has been, "What does Rashi say?"



Elie Wiesel's modest study of medieval Rashi – its brevity may be the reader's only complaint – is a sentimental journey. The most famous writer of the Holocaust, Wiesel studied Rashi as a boy in religious school. Wiesel's Orthodox parents informed him early that an ancestor of the family was the great Rashi, perhaps as the model for the scholar they wanted Wiesel to be. This early memory of Rashi is enmeshed with recollections of his parents, who with his sister did not survive Auschwitz. To Rashi's legendary humility, Wiesel presents his own. At his age, Wiesel wonders if he is up to explaining his loving mentor, Rashi. The results prove otherwise.

His study begins with historical context, Rashi's 11th-century France and Europe, with Jews facing forced conversions, massacres, martyrdom and exile. Smaller communities, such as Rashi's in Troyes, France, were sometimes spared the assaults, which others in the Rhineland and elsewhere

## Book Review

*"Rashi, a Portrait," by Elie Wiesel. Schocken Nextbook, New York: 2009. Translated from the French by Catherine Temerson.*

suffered. Even before Crusaders terrorized Jewish communities, local authorities accused Jews of the ritual murder of Christian children and threatened pogroms.

Rashi was fully aware of his people's suffering, perhaps for Wiesel a foreshadowing of Europe in the catastrophic 1940s. Many in Rashi's time chose Kiddush ha-Shem, to become martyrs. Others were forced or coerced to convert. Rashi interprets "The Song of Songs," for example, as an allegory on the disasters of the Jews, who, in spite of sins and flaws, will be vindicated. The Covenant is a metaphoric marriage, still honored, between the Almighty and the Chosen People.

In perhaps as many as 400 Responsa – Rashi responses to queries about Jewish law – Jews who converted to Christianity now wished to return to their faith and asked for guidance. Rashi emphasizes that they remain Jews, according to Jewish law, regardless of their renunciation. His legendary compassion, here for these returnees, contrasts in his commentaries with his disdain for Esau, Jacob's slow-witted older brother, who was deceived out of his birthright. Rashi's railing against Esau is perhaps veiled criticism of the Esau-like oppressors, Crusaders and the like, around him.

Indeed, Rashi seems to anticipate future hostility toward the Jewish people, even in our own time. In Genesis, Rashi answers the question of why the story begins with the creation of heaven

and earth, and not with the first laws of observance. For Rashi, the Holy One shows from whence the land has come, and the right to give land to one people over another. "If the nations of the world say to Israel, 'You are thieves, brigands, because you conquered the land ...' [Jews can answer:] the whole earth belongs to the Holy One ... who offered it to whomsoever he wanted. ... He took it away from them and gave it to us." Against current attempts to delegitimize Israel as a Jewish homeland, Rashi's argument, based on Biblical text, seems relevant.

For Wiesel, of the four methods of Biblical exegesis and interpretation, Rashi is at his best with the literal method of Peshat, arguing from the text, the "passion for delving into text ... to find hidden meaning." When the Almighty reprimands Cain for murder, the word used for the blood Cain has spilled is in the plural form. From this, Rashi derives that "the blood of your brother [means] also his descendants," that that murder kills more than the victim, a rationale for the sanctity of life. In other Torah examples, the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the disruption of the Tower of Babel, the Almighty decides "to go down ... and see" directly immoral or sacrilegious behavior. Torah is teaching, says Rashi, that judges must see evidence before reaching a verdict.

Rashi is pictured in old woodcuts, bearded, with flowing robes, deep in thought over a text. The scene is an emblem of the Jew at study. Wiesel reminds us that the Rabbis extol us to study Torah even in the hour before death. Some suggest that the Almighty, the Author, studies three hours a day. If so, these students may ask, "What does Rashi say?"

## ASK THE REBBETZIN



By  
The Rebbetzin  
KORFF

### Is a ketubah required?

Dear Rebbetzin,

**I am getting married in a few months. My mother says I must have a ketubah or I will not be legally married. What is a ketubah and why is it important?**

BRIDE-TO-BE

Dear Bride-to-Be,

A ketubah is a Jewish wedding "contract" that essentially protects a woman's rights by requiring the groom to agree to provide such things as food, shelter, a financial settlement in the case of divorce and even physical satisfaction – radically "modern" concepts and

innovations, particularly considering when this requirement was instituted by our rabbinic sages thousands of years ago.

Having a ketubah is required by traditional Judaism, but that doesn't mean that you wouldn't or couldn't be legally married without it – if you were for some reason married by someone who didn't arrange for the ketubah you would still be married despite violating the halachic requirement that all brides have, and not live with a husband without, a ketubah.

### Keeping the faith on campus

Dear Rebbetzin,

**My son is in his second year of college. He has some good friends there, but I worry that he is not getting involved with the Jewish community. When I ask him if he has visited Hillel, he just makes up excuses. I would love for him to go to Hillel and maybe even meet a girl there. What can I say to him that will encourage him to go?**

WORRIED DAD

Dear Worried,

Unfortunately, just as with most things when a child starts making decisions on his own, there is not a lot you can say. That doesn't mean you shouldn't try, and it is important that you do, gently, make your views known, and it is more likely than not that your views will be taken into account.

At the same time you should understand that not all Hillels are equal, and not all Jewish communities on the college campuses are the same – some are definitely more engaging and inviting than others, and chemistry does play a role.

While a great many students become or stay involved with the Jewish community while in college, others don't get turned on to it until after school. It also depends upon whether your son keeps kosher, and would therefore be more likely to be eating at Hillel, or is used to attending services or participating in other Jewish events.

Don't give up, but keep the questioning and encouragement subtle and not overbearing

Send an e-mail inquiry to [Rebbetzin@Rebbe.org](mailto:Rebbetzin@Rebbe.org).