



## Educator's Guide

# How Rashi Decoded Ancient Jewish Texts

Trying to read the Torah or Talmud before the 11th century would be like trying to read a poem written in Old English. The characters were unfamiliar, the references obscure, and the story hard to make out. Amidst the violent First Crusade, a Jewish scholar known as Rashi illuminated a path for the Jews of Ashkenaz who, without him, might have been lost... to the Dark Ages.

[Link to video](#)

## Further Learning

1. Maggie Anton, [Rashi's Daughters, Book I: Joheved](#)
2. Joshua London, [What Kind of Wine Did Rashi Make?](#)
3. Sarah Pruitt, [6 Reasons the Dark Ages Weren't So Dark](#)
4. Avigail Rock, [Rashi and Christianity](#)
5. Avigail Rock, [Rashi's Moral and Educational Philosophy](#)
6. Yehuda Shurpin, [What is Rashi Script?](#)
7. Unpacked, [The Truth about Ashkenazi Jews](#)

## Review Questions

1. What was Rashi's primary goal in his commentary?
  - a. To connect the Torah to Kabbalistic and complex ideas
  - b. To show why Christianity was incorrect
  - c. **To simplify ideas which allowed increased understanding**



- d. To allow his legacy as an influential rabbi to affect future generations' learning
- 2.** What was Rashi's profession, outside of learning Torah?
  - a. Doctor
  - b. Vintner**
  - c. Writer
  - d. No profession, he only learned Torah
- 3.** Which leader called to free Jerusalem from the infidels during the First Crusade?
  - a. Pope Innocent IX
  - b. The Sultan
  - c. King Louis IV
  - d. Pope Urban II**
- 4.** How many sons did Rashi have?
  - a. 0**
  - b. 1
  - c. 2
  - d. 3
- 5.** What were the commentaries of Rashi's grandchildren called?
  - a. They were written under Rashi's name
  - b. Ba'alei Tosafot ("Additions")**
  - c. Bavli and Yerushalmi
  - d. Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi

## Discussion Questions

- 1.** [David Epstein's book, Range](#), argued that the most successful people in the world have experience and knowledge in multiple domains. For example, he would say that Rashi's experience in harvesting wine actually gave him a stronger understanding of the Bible than if he had been solely focused on his Biblical studies. Do you agree that Rashi's Biblical understanding would have been enhanced by his work as a vintner, or is it better for people to specialize their studies in one specific area?



2. The video mentions that there is evidence that Rashi's daughters were progressive for their time, teaching Torah to local women and practicing the proper performance of certain Jewish rituals. Rashi was also a defender of women's rights within religion. Do you think women now have equal rights in Judaism, or are there issues and questions that Jewish leaders still need to address and confront?
3. When Rashi was born, conversions under the threat of death were common for non-Christians. They were told by leaders, "Accept baptism and you will live." The Jews who refused to be converted have been praised for their heroism and unwavering commitment to God. They also are credited with the survival of the Jewish people and tradition. However, Judaism also values [pikuach nefesh](#), or the saving of a life. In this case, conversion would have allowed some people's lives to be saved. If you were the Jewish leader at that time, what would you have advised your community under threat and why?
4. Rashi's understandings of Biblical and Talmudic have become foundational in Jewish learning. This is evidenced by the fact that the words of the Talmud are always accompanied by Rashi and his children and grandchildren's commentaries! One cannot ignore Rashi's influence on future generations' learning, but there are many other Biblical and Talmudic scholars who have since published their commentaries. Should we ever examine if another commentator should be primarily featured in printed editions of the Bible and Talmud, or should Rashi's commentaries maintain their traditional position?
5. [One of the events mentioned in the video is the public burning of Talmuds in Paris in 1242.](#) Charges were brought that the Talmud was anti-Christian, and a trial was brought by King Louis IX. The Talmud was found to be blasphemous which led to the public burning. Later, Pope Innocent IV ruled that only the offensive passages should be censored instead of the entire work. Book censorship continues to be heavily debated. In fact, a few years before this, [Rabbeinu Yonah had advocated for the public burning of Rambam's \*The Guide for the Perplexed\* at the same location. \(He later regretted his decision.\)](#) While the burning of the Talmud was obviously devastating for the Jewish community, are there any books or topics that deserve to be censored by a government or should the government allow freedom of speech (through the written form) in all situations? Click here for a [list of books](#) currently censored.



6. In response to the First Crusade and increasing Christian propaganda against Jewish theology, [Rashi began inserting polemical and moral messages into his commentaries](#). [While in the past religious polemical debates were frequent](#), there has been a shift in recent years among religious leaders to examine what we have in common rather than what divides us. [Some like Rav Joseph Soloveitchik prohibited even peaceful interfaith dialogue about theological topics, in fear that each religious group may blur the lines between our respective dialogues](#). Do you believe it is appropriate to engage in interfaith dialogue about theology and to debate the merits of another religion, or should religious groups agree to disagree and avoid commenting on other religious groups' theological beliefs?

## Learning Activities

1. Use our ready-made lesson plan about Rashi [HERE](#).
2. Nechama Leibowitz was the modern-day scholar on understanding Rashi's Biblical commentaries. As part of her teaching, she popularized the phrase, "What is bothering Rashi?" so they could understand why Rashi was writing a commentary on that verse. [Pick any chapter](#) of the Five Books of Moses and read it in its entirety. Then, underline any verses or phrases that are ambiguous to you and write down any questions you may have. Last, look at Rashi's commentary (available in many written editions or through this [link](#)) and compare to see if Rashi commented on the same verses or phrases that you had questions on.
3. Given the context of the First Crusades, Rashi was worried that the Jewish claim over the Land of Israel and Jerusalem was being threatened. Read [this article](#) and [this article](#) (Part F) on Rashi's perspective of the Jewish claim to Israel. Today, the Jewish claim over Israel is still being threatened. Write a one-page speech explaining why Israel is the Jewish homeland. Think about the historical and religious ties that the Jewish people have to Israel. Consider using [this article](#) from Unpacked to help frame your writing.
4. Split the class into pairs of two. One person should be assigned Ashkenazi Jewry and read this [article](#), and the other person should be assigned Sephardi Jewry and read this [article](#). They should share the information they learned with each other. Then they should read [this article](#) about the similarities and differences



between Ashkenazi Jewry and Sephardi Jewry and [fill out a Venn Diagram](#).

5. Play our [Kahoot](#) about Rashi!

## Reflection Questions

1. The United States Navy created an acronym in the 1960s: [KISS or Keep It Simple, Stupid](#). The principle was that things are best understood if they are kept simple as opposed to made complicated. Rashi's commentaries on the Torah tried to make the Biblical verses simple and accessible. Think about a topic you know really well but others may find complicated (i.e. sports rules, video game rules, a subject in school). Using KISS or the style of Rashi, try to make the rules as simple as possible for others to understand.
2. Rashi was unashamed when he did not understand a Biblical verse or idea. He commented several times, "I admit that I don't know what this verse wants to tell us." It is not easy for a person to acknowledge publicly when they do not understand something. In this case, Rashi could have simply not commented on the verse. [Rashbam also writes in his commentary how Rashi would reflect on the meaning of verses and was willing to change his opinion](#), also demonstrating Rashi's humility. How do you react when you don't know information about a topic that is being discussed or you learn information about a topic that you already know a lot about?
3. There are many great people in history who were prolific writers. In "[Non-Stop](#)" [from the award-winning play, Hamilton](#), some of the lyrics speak about Alexander Hamilton's writing: "How do you write like tomorrow won't arrive? How do you write like you need it to survive? How do you write every second you're alive?" Similarly, Rashi wrote extensively throughout his life and especially in his last ten years. Knowing that writing is a powerful tool of communication and legacy, what type of writing do you wish to achieve in your life? What topics do you wish to address?
4. During the First Crusade, the Jews were threatened by, "Accept baptism and you will live. Burn and die if you do not." It is of course impossible to know with certainty how one would be feeling during that moment, but try to imagine you were at the scene. What types of feelings would you have?



5. By the age of 30, Rashi had learned in several prominent institutions, become a Talmudic scholar, was invited to join the rabbinical court, was an accomplished vintner, and opened his own yeshiva. What do you hope to accomplish by the age of 30?