

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



מרחב ואחריות

www.TorahLeadership.org

"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

IS RASHI STILL NECESSARY? A REFLECTION ON THE OCCASION OF NOT FINISHING SHAS, AGAIN

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

Once upon a time, the Talmud was learned orally. We don't know when it was first written down, or (which may be much later) when it was first studied from a written text. But we can guesstimate that a key transition point was the completion of Rashi's commentary. Why? Because unlike the Talmud, Rashi's commentary is not composed in a form conducive to memorization.

Polemicists of various ideological bents often argue that written traditions are less flexible than oral ones. This is nonsense – each type has its own rigidities. For example: the need for memorization generally requires texts to exist in one specific form for each tradent, although each tradent will have a unique variant. Written texts allow everyone access to all the variants, as in what we call "critical editions." You can think of written texts as "multicultural," and like all multiculturalisms, they promote pluralism while diminishing diversity, because genuine cultural diversity requires a significant degree of cultural isolation. Polytheism and monotheism are incompatible, and I doubt that even monolatry can survive for long in a culture that ideologically celebrates polytheism.

Rashi's commentary similarly had both homogenizing and pluralizing effects. It recorded multiple texts, but only when arguing for the superiority of one of them. It established a dominant, even hegemonistic, baseline interpretation that largely excluded competing traditions from the marketplace; and by making that interpretation universally accessible, democratized and decentralized higher-level interpretation.

For almost nine centuries, Rashi's commentary continued to play that same role. But in the late 20th century, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz's commentary posed the first real competition. Steinsaltz largely rewrote Rashi in Modern Hebrew, and integrated his commentary into the flow of the Talmud. He also punctuated and vocalized the Talmud. The unintended result was that for beginning students, reading Rashi became a burden rather than a necessity. Everything that Rashi contributed to baseline interpretation was in Steinsaltz, usually with added clarity and without any Aramaic (or Old French).

Rabbi Steinsaltz was harshly criticized for printing the Talmud in a different format from the Vilna edition, even though he preserved all its information and marked the pagination. This criticism was on its face absurd; the Vilna edition was a product of the late 19th

century, and various other 20th century editions had changed the formatting and pagination without objection.

But on a deeper level, the critiques were responding, unconsciously and often unconsciously, to two real issues. The first was that the Talmud was still a little bit oral. Why? Because it was poorly indexed, so that often the only way to find things was to remember where they were. How did one remember where they were? The most common way was to remember page numbers and visual location on the page. By changing the page, Steinsaltz made clear that this kind of *bekint* would lose its significance as indexing progressed, for example via the incredible Encyclopedia Talmudit. The second was that Steinsaltz essentially replaced Rashi.

Fundamentalist reactionaries often end up preserving forms while accommodating the loss of the substance they had embodied. ArtScroll's commentary does everything that Steinsaltz did, in spades, but reprints a traditional-looking Talmud page alongside it (and the Koren edition now offers an updated Steinsaltz in English; I hope to review Bava Kamma soon). Note that Artscroll's often-vestigial parallel page is the superb and universally acclaimed Oz Vehadar edition, which preserves the "look and feel" of the Vilna edition but on occasion actually emends the text! Note also that Artscroll's base translation/commentary explicitly aspires to explain the text in accordance with Rashi.

I love Rashi's commentary, and mourn its declining significance. Summer Beit Midrash interviews are often devoted to aggressively punctilious readings of Rashi. At the same time, I aspire not to be a fundamentalist reactionary. A dear friend and colleague recently challenged me to explain **why** I thought Rashi was still **pedagogically** important in the age of Steinsaltz/Koren and Artscroll, and I did not have a good enough answer ready. To be sure, he is a valuable *sheetab*, on the level of Tosafot and Rambam, and for advanced students, understanding Rashi is necessary because so many later commentaries react to him; but why should ordinary students read him? Wouldn't a digest be sufficient and more efficient for most purposes, even for advanced students?

So here is a tentative, chastened, and partial second attempt.

Marshall McLuhan brilliantly argued that some media ("cool") encourage and even demand imagination, while others ("hot") suppress it. Radio and printed narratives, for example, require the audience to construct private images of the characters and scenes,

while television and illustrations suppress such subjective involvements.

I suspect that one can usually tell when a movie was produced without the heavy involvement of someone with a literary sensibility. A curmudgeon might call this the CGIization of narrative, in which filmmakers try ever harder to overwhelm the viewer with sensory data rather than leaving anything to the imagination.

Talmud with Artscroll is that kind of movie. Readers do not participate in the construction of the Talmud; they merely absorb it. Rashi is still radio, or at least low-resolution TV in black-and-white.

This is admittedly very much a curmudgeonly complaint. My father likes to tell a story involving Rabbi Yosef Weiss z"l. Rabbi Weiss came up to him and said: "Dr. Klapper, it's just terrible! No one wants to learn any more!" My father asked him: "What makes you say so?" and Rabbi Weiss replied: "Look at all the daf yomi shiurim springing up!"

Now we have a family connection to the daf, as my father's father was a close talmid of the Lubliner (look for the recent profile in Mishpacha magazine). And it takes curmudgeonly powers far beyond mine to see the incredible proliferation of daf yomi shiurim as evidence of a decline in serious Talmud Torah. I write this as my wife is on her way back from a very positive experience at the Siyum HaShas at Metlife. Moreover, I acknowledge it as a weakness that I can't maintain the discipline to do the daf, having surrendered after Shekalim, sometime in the second year of our marital chavrusa. So I stayed home and did the childcare, and very much appreciate the speakers' tributes to the importance of supporting one's spouse's learning.

Here's the rub. In day school education, we are just beginning to go beyond the slogan of "creating lifelong learners" and genuinely address what that means in the context of Talmud. The more realistic among us contend that for the vast majority of our students, the best we can hope for, and therefore what we should aim for, is that as adults they will attend a daf yomi shiur, or at least listen to a daf yomi podcast. If they are correct, I may have to concede that **learning** Rashi has limited utility, like making students watch ancient films that use text to advance the narrative between scenes. The same may be true about having them read unpunctuated and unvocalized texts.

The questions I have are whether having students first meet Talmud in a way that is easier, but involves them much less, will discourage some or many of them from deeper investment, and whether a generation of teachers raised that way will be incapable of conveying and inspiring that kind of investment.

Meanwhile, as a teacher blessed with high-level students, I am pretty darn convinced that properly understanding Rashi is becoming a lost art, and that this is almost certainly a consequence

of the availability of Artscroll. To remove at least one obstacle to that end, I suggest the utility of preparing an edition that integrates Rashi into the Talmud, so that it reads as a single flow, in the way that the modern competitors do. Readers interested in what such a project would look like are encouraged to look at the draft sample [here](#), which covers the opening of Berakhot just in time to start daf yomi.

For those of you too immersed in *yyun* study of other tractates, here's a short *vort* as illustration.

The opening unit of Mishnah Berakhot records that even though the Sages say that the Evening Shema may be recited only until midnight, "if it is not yet daybreak, you are obligated to recite." The Mishnah then adds that this is true not only of the Shema, rather "everything about which the Sages said "until midnight, its mitzvah is until daybreak." Two examples of nighttime mitzvot follow: burning the fats of sacrifices, and the obligation to eat certain sacrifices before the next daybreak. The Mishnah then asks why the Sages said midnight when the real deadline is daybreak, and responds: "in order to distance a person from sin." Rashi's comment on the last line reads:

*So that he not come to eat (the sacrifices) after daybreak, and become liable to excision,
and so too by the Recitation of Shema -
to catalyze a person, so that he won't say "I have time yet," and so daybreak
will come and the time pass.
But the burning of fats mentioned here – the Sages never said "until midnight"
regarding it,
and it is mentioned here only to teach you that everything practiced at night is
valid all night.*

To understand this Rashi, one must recognize a literary problem: To which cases does the line "to distance a person from sin" apply? It can't apply to the first example, since the Sages said nothing there. But how can it apply to Shema, skip burning the fats, and then apply to eating the sacrifices? I suggest that Rashi's elegant solution is that it refers literarily to the last case, but that it is included in our Mishnaic unit because it is also true of the Shema.

But – Rashi does not tell you this. What he does is:

- a) Not tell you that the Sages said nothing about the time for "burning the fats" until after he has explained the meaning of "to distance a person from sin," and
- b) Not mention the Shema as directly relevant to the last line, but rather as analogous.

Readers are encouraged to comment about whether my reconstruction of his reading is compelling.

Those interested in why Rashi identifies the relevant sin as eating the sacrifice too late, rather than as failing to eat it in time, and similarly why his concern regarding Shema is that one will mistake the time, rather than that one will fall asleep, should please email dean@torahleadership.org.