The Great Jewish Books Course

(In memory of Dr. Mark Wainberg z”l)

Rashi – A Light in the Dark Ages

**I Biographical Sketch**

1. Simply no words to describe his influence in the Jewish world
   1. He has no equal in providing education to the masses, inspiration to the scholars, and guidance to his people.
   2. With absolute commitment to clarifying the complexity of every letter, word and phrase in the Torah (and Talmud), he seamlessly blended explanations, story telling and moral lessons into the gift he left us – a timeless commentary that is both concise, sweet and illuminating, as relevant today as when it was first published
   3. Holds the student’s hand through the text, wishing to clarify *peshuto shel mikra*, with words both simple, concise and direct, yet deep and intricate, he his “simultaneously our first grade teacher spreading honey to make Torah sweet, and our post graduate mentor, where only after years of study do we appreciate his genius and depth”
   4. His personality shines forth from his writings: intellectually honest and humble, unassuming faith, he is soft, gentle and compassionate, strong in his convictions and confident in Divine justice and salvation, tolerant of humanity and its foibles. Most of all, his love of Torah, the Jewish people and our Land drips from his every word.
2. **R**abbi **S**hlomo **Y**itzchaki (**R**abban **S**hel **Y**israel)
   1. Born in Troyes, Champagne in Northern France in 1040
      1. It is claimed he descended from Dovid HaMelech, but he himself never makes such a claim, nor is there any definitive proof
      2. Legends: father found a gem, refused to sell; pregnant mother avoiding horses
   2. From an early age distinguished as a scholar and studied with the leading sages in Worms and Mainz from about age 8, eventually returning to Troyes (1065) where he headed Beit Din and founded a Yeshiva
   3. Alleged to have been a vintner (his father was)
3. House of Rashi
   1. Had 3 daughters (no sons): Yocheved Miriam and Rachel (we know almost nothing of his wife, scholars conjecture she died young)
      1. Legends abound about their scholarship, teffilin
   2. Sons in law and grandsons became known as Baalei Tosfos
      1. Rashbam, Rivam, Rabbeinu Tam
4. The Crusades
   1. Launched in 1096, and in the early years were a tragic calamity for the Jewish communities of the Rhineland.
   2. Many questions of the time centered around Jews who forcibly converted and wanted to return: Ruled leniently – always have to accept them
   3. Legend (almost definitively apocryphal) surrounding Duke Godfrey of Bouillon, returning to France in defeat with just 3 horses

**II Commentary on Chumash**

1. His greatest Legacy: Most Widely reproduced and disseminated commentary
   1. Rabbeinu Tam: “I could have duplicated my grandfather’s commentary to the Talmud, but no one could duplicate his commentary to the Chumash”
   2. Well over 300 commentaries on his commentary
   3. Cannot print a Chumash without it or using it as a starting point for the discussion – he is literally the Rebbe of every Jew
2. Masterful in choosing relevant midrashim and gemarah and weaving them in the text
   1. Blended lessons in Hebrew grammar and vocabulary, intuitive and logical explanations of the text, penetrating human psychology, use of metaphor and allegory to bring the Torah to life
   2. his commentaries show a keen understanding of the science, medicine, technology, and the society of his times
3. What’s bothering Rashi? working backwards to understand the problem
4. Rashi script
   1. Would be unrecognizable to Rashi himself (created in a 1475 printing based of a Sephardic semi cursive handwriting

**III Commentary on the Talmud**

1. Known as the *Kuntress* – The Notebook – compiled, edited, abridged, and organized the notes and traditions of previous generations
   1. Diligently amended and corrected the text
2. Goal was a running phrase by phrase guide to elucidate the text (which has no punctuation)
   1. As opposed to Tosafos, who analyzed the passage in contrast to others in the Talmud
   2. Worst feeling for a student is getting stuck on a line with no comment from Rashi
3. First step of every Talmud student and springboard for every discussion

**IV Final Thoughts**

1. We have over 300 responsa from him as well as several liturgic elegies and poems
2. Buried in Troyes (1105), but the cemetery location was lost over time. A University professor in recent years discovered an ancient map and located the cemetery under a public square in the modern city. There is a monument currently in the square with a plaque recognizing the site.

**Addendum and Sources**

1. First comment on Bereishit 1:1

בראשית. אמר רבי יצחק לא היה צריך להתחיל את התורה אלא מהחדש הזה לכם, שהיא מצוה ראשונה שנצטוו בה ישראל, ומה טעם פתח בבראשית? משום כח מעשיו הגיד לעמו לתת להם נחלת גוים (תהילים קי"א), שאם יאמרו אמות העולם לישראל לסטים אתם, שכבשתם ארצות שבעה גוים, הם אומרים להם כל הארץ של הקב"ה היא, הוא בראה ונתנה לאשר ישר בעיניו, ברצונו נתנה להם, וברצונו נטלה מהם ונתנה לנו:

IN THE BEGINNING — Rabbi Isaac said: The Torah which is the Law book of Israel should have commenced with the verse (Exodus 12:2) “This month shall be unto you the first of the months” which is the first commandment given to Israel. What is the reason, then, that it commences with the account of the Creation? Because of the thought expressed in the text (Psalms 111:6) “He declared to His people the strength of His works, in order that He might give them the heritage of the nations.” For should the peoples of the world say to Israel, “You are robbers, because you took by force the lands of the seven nations of Canaan”, Israel may reply to them, “All the earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it and gave it to whom He pleased. When He willed He gave it to them, and when He willed He took it from them and gave it to us” (Yalkut Shimoni on Torah 187).

1. First comment on Shmot 1:1

ואלה שמות בני ישראל. אַעַ"פִּ שֶׁמְּנָאָן בְּחַיֵּיהֶם בִּשְׁמוֹתָם, חָזַר וּמְנָאָם בְּמִיתָתָם, **לְהוֹדִיעַ חִבָּתָם**, שֶׁנִּמְשְׁלוּ לְכוֹכָבִים, שֶׁמּוֹצִיאָם וּמַכְנִיסָם בְּמִסְפַּר וּבִשְׁמוֹתָם (שמות רבה), שֶׁנֶּ' "הַמּוֹצִיא בְמִסְפָּר צְבָאָם לְכֻלָּם בְּשֵׁם יִקְרָא" (ישעיהו מ'):

NOW THESE ARE THE NAMES OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL — Although the Torah has already enumerated them by name whilst they were living, it again enumerates them when it tells us of their death, thus showing how dear they were to G-d — that they are compared to the stars which also G-d brings out and brings in by number and name when they cease to shine, as it is said, (Isaiah 40:26) “He bringeth out their host by number, He calleth them all by name” (Exodus Rabbah 1:3

1. First comment on Vayikra 1:1

ויקרא אל משה. לְכָל דִּבְּרוֹת וּלְכָל אֲמִירוֹת וּלְכָל צִוּוּיִים קָדְמָה קְרִיאָה, **לְשׁוֹן חִבָּה**, לָשׁוֹן שֶׁמַּלְאֲכֵי הַשָּׁרֵת מִשְׁתַּמְּשִׁין בּוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וְקָרָא זֶה אֶל זֶה (ישעיהו ו'), אֲבָל לִנְבִיאֵי אֻמּוֹת הָעוֹלָם נִגְלָה עֲלֵיהֶן בִּלְשׁוֹן עֲרָאִי וְטֻמְאָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וַיִּקָּר אֱלֹהִים אֶל בִּלְעָם (במדבר כ"ג):

AND [THE L-RD] CALLED UNTO MOSES — All oral communications of the L-rd to Moshe whether they are introduced by דבר or by אמר or by צו were preceded by a “call”. It is a way of expressing affection, the mode used by the ministering angels when addressing each other, as it is said (Isaiah 6:3) “And one called unto another [and said, Holy, holy, holy is the L-rd of hosts]”. To the prophets of the nations of the world, however, G-d revealed himself in a manner which Scripture describes by an expression ordinarily used for denoting events of a casual character and of uncleanness, as it is said, (Numbers 23:4) “and G-d happened to meet (ויקר) Balaam” (cf. Bereishit Rabbah 52:5).

1. First comment on Bamidbar 1:1

וידבר. במדבר סיני באחד לחדש וגו'. **מִתּוֹךְ חִבָּתָן לְפָנָיו מוֹנֶה** אוֹתָם כָּל שָׁעָה — כְּשֶׁיָּצְאוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם מְנָאָן, וּכְשֶׁנָּפְלוּ בָּעֵגֶל מְנָאָן לֵידַע מִנְיַן הַנּוֹתָרִים, כְּשֶׁבָּא לְהַשְׁרוֹת שְׁכִינָתוֹ עֲלֵיהֶם מְנָאָם, בְּאֶחָד בְּנִיסָן הוּקַם הַמִּשְׁכָּן וּבְאֶחָד בְּאִיָּר מְנָאָם:

AND [THE L-RD] SPOKE [UNTO MOSHE] IN THE DESERT OF SINAI … etc. — Because they were dear to him, He counts them every now and then: when they went forth from Egypt He counted them (Exodus 12:37), when many of them fell in consequence of their having worshipped the golden calf He counted them to ascertain the number of those left (cf. Rashi Exodus 30:16); when he was about to make His Shechinah dwell amongst them (i. e. when He commanded them to make a Tabernacle), He again took their census; for on the first day of Nisan the Tabernacle was erected (Exodus 40:2) and shortly afterwards, on the first day of Iyar, He counted them.

1. First comment on Devarim 1:1

אלה הדברים. לְפִי שֶׁהֵן דִּבְרֵי תוֹכָחוֹת וּמָנָה כָאן כָּל הַמְּקוֹמוֹת שֶׁהִכְעִיסוּ לִפְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם בָּהֶן, לְפִיכָךְ סָתַם אֶת הַדְּבָרִים וְהִזְכִּירָם בְּרֶמֶז **מִפְּנֵי כְבוֹדָן שֶׁל יִשְׂרָאֵל** (עי' ספרי):

THESE ARE THE WORDS — Because these are words of reproof and he is enumerating here all the places where they provoked G-d to anger, therefore he suppresses all mention of the matters in which they sinned and refers to them only by a mere allusion contained in the names of these places out of regard and honour for Israel (cf. Sifrei Devarim 1:1;).

1. Beginning of Parshat Vayeira

א וַיֵּרָ֤א אֵלָיו֙ ה' בְּאֵֽלֹנֵ֖י מַמְרֵ֑א וְה֛וּא יֹשֵׁ֥ב פֶּֽתַֽח הָאֹ֖הֶל כְּחֹ֥ם הַיּֽוֹם:

(1) Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day. (2) He lifted his eyes and saw, behold! Three men were standing over him….

**וירא אליו**. לְבַקֵּר אֶת הַחוֹלֶה. אָמַר רַבִּי חָמָא בַּר חֲנִינָא, יוֹם שְׁלִישִׁי לְמִילָתוֹ הָיָה, וּבָא הַקָּבָּ"ה וְשָׁאַל בִּשְׁלוֹמוֹ (בבא מציעא פ"ו):

AND THE L-RD APPEARED UNTO HIM to visit the sick man. R. Hama the son of Hanina said: it was the third day after his circumcision and the Holy One, blessed be He, came and inquired after the state of his health (Bava Metzia 86b)

**באלוני ממרא.** הוּא שֶׁנָּתַן לוֹ עֵצָה עַל הַמִּילָה, לְפִיכָךְ נִגְלָה עָלָיו בְּחֶלְקוֹ (בראשית רבה):

BY THE PLAINS OF MAMRÉ — It was he (Mamre) who advised him (Abraham) regarding the circumcision and therefore He revealed himself to him in his (Mamre’s) territory (Genesis Rabbah 42:8).

**יושב**. ישב כְּתִיב, בִּקֵּשׁ לַעֲמֹד, אָמַר לוֹ הַקָּבָּ"ה שֵׁב וַאֲנִי אֶעֱמֹד, וְאַתָּה סִימָן לְבָנֶיךָ שֶׁעָתִיד אֲנִי לְהִתְיַצֵּב בַּעֲדַת הַדַּיָּנִים וְהֵן יוֹשְׁבִין, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר אֱלֹהִים נִצָּב בַּעֲדַת אֵל (תהילים פ"ב) (בראשית רבה):

WAS SITTING — The word is written ישב (without the ו) and therefore may he translated ”he sat”: He wished to rise, but the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, Sit and I will stand. You shall form an example to your descendants — that I, in time to come, will stand in the assembly of the judges while they will sit, as it is said, (Psalms 82:1) “G-d stands in the assembly of the judges” (Genesis Rabbah 48:7)

**פתח האהל**. לִרְאוֹת אִם יֵשׁ עוֹבֵר וָשָׁב וְיַכְנִיסֵם בְּבֵיתוֹ:

AT THE TENT-DOOR — that he might see whether anyone passed by, and invite him into the house

**כחום היום**. הוֹצִיא הַקָבָּ"ה חַמָּה מִנַּרְתִּיקָהּ, שֶׁלֹּא לְהַטְרִיחוֹ בְּאוֹרְחִים, וּלְפִי שֶׁרָאָהוּ מִצְטַעֵר שֶׁלֹּא הָיוּ אוֹרְחִים בָּאִים, הֵבִיא הַמַּלְאָכִים עָלָיו בִּדְמוּת אֲנָשִׁים (בבא מציעא שם):

IN THE HEAT OF THE DAY — The Holy One, blessed be He, brought the sun out of its sheath that he might not be troubled by travellers, and when He perceived that he was grieved that no travellers came He brought to him angels in the form of men (Bava Metzia 86b).

1. Our Rebbe in Humility (part 1): It’s ok to not know

ויִּשְׁלַ֤ח יִצְחָק֙ אֶֽת־יַעֲקֹ֔ב וַיֵּ֖לֶךְ פַּדֶּ֣נָֽה אֲרָ֑ם אֶל־לָבָ֤ן בֶּן־בְּתוּאֵל֙ הָֽאֲרַמִּ֔י אֲחִ֣י רִבְקָ֔ה אֵ֥ם יַעֲקֹ֖ב וְעֵשָֽׂו׃ (בראשית כח:ה)

Then Isaac sent Jacob off, and he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, mother of Jacob and Esau.

אם יעקב ועשו. אֵינִי יוֹדֵעַ מַה מְּלַמְּדֵנוּ:

MOTHER OF JACOB AND ESAU — I do not know what these words are teaching us.

1. Our Rebbe in Humility (part 2): how to introduce your own thoughts

ואפוד. לֹא שָׁמַעְתִּי וְלֹא מָצָאתִי בַּבָּרַיְתָא פֵּרוּשׁ תַּבְנִיתוֹ**, וְלִבִּי אוֹמֵר לִי** שֶׁהוּא חֲגוֹרָה לוֹ מֵאֲחוֹרָיו, רָחְבּוֹ כְּרֹחַב גַּב אִישׁ, כְּמִין סִינָר שֶׁקּוֹרִין פורצי"נט בְּלַעַז, שֶׁחוֹגְרוֹת הַשָּׂרוֹת כְּשֶׁרוֹכְבוֹת עַל הַסּוּסִים, כָּךְ מַעֲשֵׂהוּ מִלְּמַטָּה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וְדָוִד חָגוּר אֵפוֹד בָּד, לָמַדְנוּ שֶׁהָאֵפוֹד חֲגוֹרָה הִיא…**וְעוֹד אוֹמֵר לִי לִבִּי** שֶׁיֵּשׁ רְאָיָה שֶׁהוּא מִין לְבוּשׁ, שֶׁתִּרְגֵּם יוֹנָתָן וְדָוִד חָגוּר אֵפוֹד בָּד (שמואל ב ו') – כַּרְדּוּט דְּבוּץ, וְתִרְגֵּם כְּמוֹ כֵן מְעִילִים כַּרְדּוּטִין, בְּמַעֲשֵׂה תָּמָר אֲחוֹת אַבְשָׁלוֹם, כִּי כֵן תִּלְבַּשְׁנָה בְנוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ הַבְּתוּלוֹת מְעִילִים (שם י"ג):

AND AN EPHOD — I have heard no tradition nor have I found in the Boraitha any description of its shape, but my hearrt (mind) tells me that it was tied on behind him; its breadth was the same as the breadth of a man’s back like a kind of apron which is called pourceint in old French which ladies of rank tie on when they ride on horse-back. Such, as mentioned, was the way in which the lower part was made, as it is said, (II Samuel 6:14) “And David was girded with a linen ephod” — this informs us that the ephod was something tied on the body… Further, my heart (mind) tells me that there is evidence that it was a kind of garment, for Jonathan ben Uzziel translates (II Samuel 6:14) “And David was girded with a linen ephod” by “a linen כרדוט” and exactly similarly does he translate מעילים, “robes”, by כרדוטין in the story of Tamar, Absolom’s sister, (II Samuel 13:18) “For with such robes (מעילים) were the king’s daughters that were virgins apparelled”.

1. Our Rebbe in Humility (part 3): Leadership

**אֲשֶׁ֥ר נָשִׂ֖יא יֶֽחֱטָ֑א וְעָשָׂ֡ה אַחַ֣ת מִכָּל־מִצְוֺת֩ ה' אֱלֹהָ֜יו אֲשֶׁ֧ר לֹא־תֵעָשֶׂ֛ינָה בִּשְׁגָגָ֖ה וְאָשֵֽׁם׃ (ויקרא ד׳:כ״ב)**

When a ruler sins, and commits one from among all the commandments of Hshem that shall not be done and has become guilty…

**אשר נשיא יחטא.** לְשׁוֹן אַשְׁרֵי — אַשְׁרֵי הַדּוֹר שֶׁהַנָּשִׂיא שֶׁלּוֹ נוֹתֵן לֵב לְהָבִיא כַּפָּרָה עַל שִׁגְגָתוֹ, קַל וָחֹמֶר שֶׁמִּתְחָרֵט עַל זְדוֹנוֹתָיו (ספרא):

The word אשר is connected in meaning with ‎‎‏אשרי “happy”. Happy is the generation whose prince (king) takes care to bring an atonement sacrifice even for an inadvertent act of his; how much the more certain is it that he will do penance for his wilful sins

1. Our ethical guidepost to interpret Jewish trauma

**לֹֽא־יִהְיֶ֥ה לְךָ֛ בְּכִֽיסְךָ֖ אֶ֣בֶן וָאָ֑בֶן גְּדוֹלָ֖ה וּקְטַנָּֽה׃ לֹא־יִהְיֶ֥ה לְךָ֛ בְּבֵיתְךָ֖ אֵיפָ֣ה וְאֵיפָ֑ה גְּדוֹלָ֖ה וּקְטַנָּֽה׃ אֶ֣בֶן שְׁלֵמָ֤ה וָצֶ֙דֶק֙ יִֽהְיֶה־לָּ֔ךְ אֵיפָ֧ה שְׁלֵמָ֛ה וָצֶ֖דֶק יִֽהְיֶה־לָּ֑ךְ לְמַ֙עַן֙ יַאֲרִ֣יכוּ יָמֶ֔יךָ עַ֚ל הָֽאֲדָמָ֔ה אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶ֖יךָ נֹתֵ֥ן לָֽךְ׃ כִּ֧י תוֹעֲבַ֛ת ֥ה' אֱלֹהֶ֖יךָ כָּל־עֹ֣שֵׂה אֵ֑לֶּה כֹּ֖ל עֹ֥שֵׂה עָֽוֶל׃ זָכ֕וֹר אֵ֛ת אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂ֥ה לְךָ֖ עֲמָלֵ֑ק בַּדֶּ֖רֶךְ בְּצֵאתְכֶ֥ם מִמִּצְרָֽיִם׃ (דברים כה:טו-יז)**

**זכור את אשר עשה לך**. אִם שִׁקַּרְתָּ בְמִדּוֹת וּבְמִשְׁקָלוֹת הֱוֵי דוֹאֵג מִגֵּרוּי הָאוֹיֵב, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (משלי י"א) "מֹאזְנֵי מִרְמָה תּוֹעֲבַת ה'", וּכְתִיב בַּתְרֵיהּ "בָּא זָדוֹן וַיָּבֹא קָלוֹן" (תנחומא):

REMEMBER WHAT [AMALEK] DID TO YOU — If you use false weights and measures then you must apprehend the provocation of the enemy, as it states (Proverbs 11:1): “A false balance is an abomination to the L-rd, etc.”, and there is written immediately after this (v. 2): “If intentional sin comes, shame comes”(Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Teitzei 8).

1. Our spiritual conscience

לֹא־תְקַלֵּ֣ל חֵרֵ֔שׁ וְלִפְנֵ֣י עִוֵּ֔ר לֹ֥א תִתֵּ֖ן מִכְשֹׁ֑ל וְיָרֵ֥אתָ מֵּאֱלֹקיךָ אֲנִ֥י ה'׃

You shall not curse the deaf, nor place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your G-d: I am the L-RD.

**ויראת מאלהיך.** לְפִי שֶׁהַדָּבָר הַזֶּה אֵינוֹ מָסוּר לַבְּרִיּוֹת לֵידַע אִם דַּעְתּוֹ שֶׁל זֶה לְטוֹבָה אוֹ לְרָעָה, וְיָכוֹל לְהִשָּׁמֵט וְלוֹמַר לְטוֹבָה נִתְכַּוַּנְתִּי, לְפִיכָךְ נֶאֱמַר בּוֹ וְיָרֵאתָ מֵּאֱלֹהֶיךָ הַמַּכִּיר מַחְשְׁבוֹתֶיךָ; וְכֵן כָּל דָּבָר הַמָּסוּר לְלִבּוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם הָעוֹשֵׂהוּ וְאֵין שְׁאָר הַבְּרִיּוֹת מַכִּירוֹת בּוֹ, נֶאֱמַר בּוֹ וְיָרֵאתָ מֵּאֱלֹקךָ:

BUT THOU SHALT BE AFRAID OF THY G-D — Because in this case it is not given to human beings to know whether the intention of this man (the offender) was for the advantage or the disadvantage of the person whom he advised, and he thus might be able to evade the responsibility by saying: "I meant it for the best", Scripture therefore states with reference to him: "But thou shall be afraid of thy G-d" Who is cognizant of thy secret thoughts. Similarly in all actions where it is given only to the heart of him who does it to know the motive that prompts him and where other people have no insight into it, Scripture states, "But be afraid of thy G-d!" (Sifra, Kedoshim, Section 2 14; Bava Metzia 58b).

1. Confident in compassionate Redemption

כְּנֶ֙שֶׁר֙ יָעִ֣יר קִנּ֔וֹ עַל־גּוֹזָלָ֖יו יְרַחֵ֑ף יִפְרֹ֤שׂ כְּנָפָיו֙ יִקָּחֵ֔הוּ יִשָּׂאֵ֖הוּ עַל־אֶבְרָתֽוֹ׃ (דברים לב:יא)

Like an eagle who rouses his nestlings, Gliding down to his young, So did He spread His wings and take him, Bear him along on His pinions.

כנשר יעיר קנו AS AN EAGLE STIRRETH UP ITS NEST — He guided them with mercy and pity like the eagle which is full of pity towards his young and does not enter its nest suddenly — before it beats and flaps with its wings above its young passing between tree and tree, between branch and branch, in order that its young may awake and have enough strength to receive it— When it comes to remove them (the young) from one place to another, it does not take them with its claws, as other birds do: because other birds are afraid of the eagle that soars so high and flies above them, therefore they carry them (the young) by their (the mother’s) claws for fear of the eagle. But the eagle is afraid only of an arrow, therefore it carries them (the young) on its wings, saying, “It is better that the arrow pierce me than that it should pierce my young”. So, too, the Holy One, blessed be He, says, (Exodus 19:4) “I bare you as on eagles wings” (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 19:4:3): when the Egyptians marched after them and overtook them at the Red Sea, they threw arrows and stone missiles at them