

ראש השנה ב' תשע"ה  
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At the turn of the twentieth century, a rabbi named Yaacov Yosef was brought to America from Vilna to be the Chief Rabbi of New York. His tenure was less than notable, except for his annual *Shabbat Shuvah* lecture, which was a major cultural and spiritual event for the whole community. People would rent rooms for that Sabbath in the neighbourhood, so that they could attend his *Shabbat Shuvah* lecture. Placards would be put up on the streets announcing the Talmudic passages that he was going to speak about, so that people could prepare.

Then, one year, the Rabbi had a stroke. He was in the hospital for most of the summer, unable to speak, unable to move. And no one believed that he would ever be able to speak or teach again. But on Rosh Hashanah, as incapacitated as he was, Rabbi Yaakov Yosef sent word that he would teach once again on *Shabbat Shuvah*. Hundreds came to hear him, wondering how he would deliver his *derashah*.

He was brought into the synagogue and helped onto the *bimah*. He sat instead of standing, with the copies of the volumes of the Talmud that he intended to cite piled up in front of him. There was a hush in the room as the rabbi started to speak. "The Talmud says..." he began, but could not finish the sentence. The crowd waited, hoping against hope that the Rabbi would somehow find the ability to speak. He tried once more: "The Talmud says..." he began, but could go no further.

Finally, after what seemed like an interminable delay, he mustered the strength to say: “Look, my children, at what can happen to a human being. A year ago I could speak and quote and teach without a note, and now look at what has become of me. Know, my children, that the ability to teach is a gift, a loan. If you can speak well, do not boast, for the gift is not yours, it is a loan. As it is written in אֹהֶיְלָהּ לְאֵל (the short prayer that we recite later in the *Musaf* Service): לְאָדָם מֵעֵרְכֵי יָב – The desire to pray comes from inside the person – וּמִי מֵעֵנָה לְשׁוֹן – but the ability to articulate is the gift of God.’ ”<sup>1</sup>

It is not unusual for us to view ourselves as impervious to failure, unsusceptible to weakness, always able to respond to challenges, utilizing our intellect and internal resources. As Rabbi Yaakov Yosef reminds us, reinforced by the liturgy of this holy day, by virtue of our being human, we have limitations, we lack all answers, we are never assured of the ability to respond adequately to real world issues without relying upon each other, without relying upon God. Just as the weather upheavals in recent days made clear the extent to which so much we encounter lies beyond the control of even the most brilliant, powerful and resource-rich individuals and entities on the planet, so too, our ability to manage lesser challenges of day-to-day living is never to be taken for granted.

One of the most important Jews ever to live was born almost a thousand years ago. To this day, his influence is felt wherever and whenever Jews gather to learn Torah seriously. Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzhak, born in the year 1040 in the city of Troyes, France, has been known to Jews ever since by the acronym *Rashi*. It is Rashi’s commentary on most of the books of the Hebrew Bible, and on the Babylonian Talmud that have guided students, young and old, through the pages of these sacred texts, helping them understand the language, assisting them through textual difficulties, and connecting the Biblical and Rabbinic texts with appropriate

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Midrashic and Halakhic references. A millennium ago, Rashi did not have the advantage of printed books, let alone today's tools of technology, since the printing press would take another four hundred years after his death to be invented. Appropriately, however, the very first Hebrew text in history to be printed was Rashi's Torah commentary, printed in 1475.

But without printed texts, dependent upon handwritten manuscripts, and his formidable memory, Rashi was able to unlock the mysteries of Biblical interpretation and Talmudic argumentation for the Jews of his time and every Jewish generation since. It is no wonder that the question heard most frequently in traditional classrooms, *yeshivot* and *batei-Midrash* has long been: “*Vous zugt Rashi? Ma omer Rashi?* What does Rashi say?” Only then, once that question would be answered, was the door to learning opened.

This Rosh Hashanah morning I highlight two unexpected tendencies in Rashi's commentaries. An example of the first occurs in his explanation of a verse in Genesis (28:5) – a verse describing the genealogy of Lavan, Jacob's father-in-law in an unusually lengthy and round-about way. Rashi comments: “איני יודע מה מלמדנו – I have no idea what this verse is supposed to be teaching us.”

We would not expect one of the most learned Jews of all times to admit, in several places in his commentary, that he could not understand or explain certain verses. Indeed, he was subjected to some harsh criticism for his candor. Rabbi Shabtai Bass, the author of the seventeenth-century Torah commentary *Siftei Hakhamim*, wrote: “There are those of us who wonder why Rashi felt the need to inform us that he doesn't know. If he doesn't know, let him keep quiet.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Wise Men and Their Tales*, 2003, p. xix

With all due respect to the *Siftei Hakhamim*, I stand here with Rashi. I like the fact, no, I love the fact that he admits to not knowing when he does not know. Here he teaches us as much as he does in any of his erudite, insightful interpretations of difficult text, in the vast majority of cases where he can and does explain. As much as we learn from his knowledge, we learn from his occasional admission of *איני יודע*, of not knowing.

You know the story of the two Jews who come before the rabbi for a Din Torah, for their dispute to be adjudicated. The first man presents his arguments, then the second gives his side of the story, of course, diametrically opposed to the first man's case. The rabbi thinks for a moment, turns to the first Jew and says to him: "You're right." He then turns to the second Jew and says to him: "You're right." The *shammass*, witnessing this scene, is genuinely perplexed. "He's right, and he's right? How can they both be right?" The rabbi says to the *shammass*: "You're also right!"

As this old story makes clear, we don't have all the answers. If one as great as Rashi could admit to not knowing, we need to learn to recognize our limitations. We often struggle with uncertainty. Is this one right, the other wrong, or is the opposite true? So often, we don't know.

We as humans have much to appreciate about ourselves. We are not without accomplishment. Men and women throughout history have used intuition and insight to build impressive civilizations. We can't take that away from us, from humankind. We have been rather successful, much of the time, as God's partner in creation.

But there are so many ways in which we lose out to nature, to God, in which technology and human ingenuity don't measure up to "acts of God," all reminding us that we are the junior partner in this relationship. That's why we worship God

and not the other way around, and, for sure, that's why it's the worst idolatry, the most insidious form of false worship, to idolize ourselves. We're good – sometimes – but we're not that good.

We don't have all the answers – certainty, especially in matters of faith, is beyond our reach.

An interesting little book by French author Laurence Cossé, is entitled *A Corner of the Veil*. The premise of the book is simple: irrefutable proof of the existence of God has been discovered, hand-written on six pages, delivered to a priest. What unfolds in the book is the view of the religious establishment that this find is extremely dangerous, a threat to social order. In seeking the destruction of the proof-of-God papers, a church official named Waldenhag makes a strong case for the world being a better place without such evidence. He notes:

Doubt about the existence of God was the only formula viable for mankind. People who wanted to believe could believe; those who preferred not to didn't have to. No greater certainty for the one than for the other... Certainty, on whichever side, breeds fanaticism... Look at the Crusaders, the Inquisitors, as well as the atheist revolutionaries: all of them slashed and burned and guillotined, completely confident they were doing the right thing. In the end, doubt is the only counterweight to human madness. It's reason, that's what doubt is.<sup>3</sup>

Rashi, who lived through the early Crusades, who was witness to widespread massacres of Jews, knew full well the consequences of individuals believing in their ability to have all the answers to questions of belief. He understood how those in

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<sup>3</sup> Laurence Cossé, *A Corner of the Veil*, Scribner, 1996, p. 232-33

the realm of religion who were convinced beyond any shadow of a doubt of the absolute correctness of their position were responsible for some of the worst outrages of history.

We remember Martin Luther, whose release of his 95 *Theses* attacking abuses of the Church five hundred years ago launched the Reformation – a milestone that is being commemorated this year with great fanfare. Luther loved the Jewish people until he realized that they would not accept his version of religious truth. Once our stubborn refusal to be converted to his theology was apparent to him, his love turned to a hate ominously foreshadowing what would emerge in that same Germany four centuries later. “I shall offer my faithful suggestions,” he wrote in 1543, “that we burn their synagogues with fire..., uproot and destroy their houses..., that all their prayer books and books of the Talmud be taken from them, their rabbis be forbidden under the pain of punishment and death to teach, that the Jews be forbidden to travel, that they be forbidden from engaging in commerce, that all their property be seized....” All this because we refused to accept as our truth, what he held to be the only acceptable truth.

In stark contrast to Luther’s approach, we have been reluctant to pursue converts actively. Maybe that hesitation stems from our not viewing ourselves as the bearers of the only religious truth that can lead one to eternal reward. Those of other faiths, as long as the traditions they maintain are moral, have the right, from our vantage point, to stay as they are.

And no Jew should ever forget that our own tradition wrestles beautifully with the limits of human reasoning. The cornerstone of our rabbinic teachings is founded upon uncertainties, disagreements, divergent viewpoints, with each viewpoint representing דברי אלהים חיים, God’s words, each legitimately claim authenticity, because we are never sure who is right and who is wrong.

Sages and commentators often bitterly disagreed with each other on the interpretation of law, the understanding of sacred text. Most famous of competing schools were the *Beit Hillel* and the *Beit Shammai*, the schools of the first-century pre-eminent sages Hillel and Shammai. As the Talmud describes it<sup>4</sup>, a *bat-kol*, a heavenly voice proclaimed ואלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים – that each viewpoint represented the word of the Living God, that each could legitimately claim authenticity, והלכה כבית הלל, but the law would go according to the *Beit Hillel*. When the decision was made to side with *Beit Hillel* in the determining of Jewish law over the opposing School of Shammai, an interesting thing happened. The opinions of Shammai were never expunged from the text. They remain, to this day, to be studied, to be honored, to be respected as authentic interpretation, even though, historically, the opinions of others, the Hillelites carried the day.

When forced to explain why the קול, the Heavenly voice proclaimed *Beit Hillel* the winner over *Beit Shammai*, nowhere does the text say that they, the Hillelites were right and others, wrong. *Beit Hillel* won, the Talmud teaches<sup>5</sup> – מפני שנוחין ועלובין היו – because they were pleasant and unassuming – ושונין דבריהן ודברי בית שמאי – so much so that they went out of their way to teach their opponents' view along with their own – ולא עוד אלא שמקדימין דברי בית שמאי לדבריהן – and, were that not enough, they would teach the other point of view before their own!

Why did *Beit Hillel* become the dominant school at the outset of the first millennium of the common era? Because they saw the spark of holiness in their opponents, no matter how bitter their arguments may have been over the years. No matter the hurts, the controversies, the disputes that had so divided them for so long, the School of Hillel recognized that they had what to learn from their opponents, and, even

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<sup>4</sup> TB *Eruvin* 13b

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

more important, that the continuity of Jewish learning, of Jewish practice, was dependent upon that willingness to be among those who are הלומד מכל אדם, to be among those who are willing to learn from all, different allegiances and approaches notwithstanding.

The late Rabbi Yehuda Amital, a Holocaust survivor who had lost his entire family, who made *aliyah* in 1944, joined the Haganah and fought in the War of Independence, was a leading force in the creation of the *Hesder Yeshivah* network, which combined *Yeshivah* learning with army service. While much of the *Yeshivah* world disdained army service and viewed the institutions of the State of Israel with suspicion, it was Rav Amital, more than anyone, who demonstrated that the highest responsibility of the religious Jew was to stand up for the defense of the Jewish state and one's fellow Jews, wherever they stood on the continuum of religious commitment.

Rav Amital would tell a story of the founder of Habad, Rabbi Shneur-Zalman of Liadi, who was sitting and studying Torah while his grandson was studying in another room. In yet another room a baby began to cry. The grandson was too involved in his learning to pay attention to the baby. It was Rabbi Shneur-Zalman, the *Rebbe* himself, who left his studies and took care of the baby. Later, he told his grandson: "If you are studying Torah and do not hear the weeping of someone who is crying for help, there is something wrong with your learning."<sup>6</sup>

Throughout his career, Rav Amital looked beyond ideology in order to see the human being. Like the tears of the baby in his story, the pain of others, their concerns, their needs, far exceeded to him in importance their politics, their level of religious practice. Politically moderate, he cultivated strong relationships with figures on the far right. The only people he rejected, whom he would not allow to

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<sup>6</sup> Yair Sheleg, *A Rare Breed, This "Simple Jew,"* HaAretz, June 10, 2005

teach at his *yeshivah*, were those, who, in his words, “[thought] that the truth [was] theirs alone and [were] unwilling to listen to others.”<sup>7</sup> He encouraged students to disagree with him, and many did, for most of his students were politically far to his right, but he insisted that they respect those with whom they differed.

Like the *Beit Hillel* before him, Rav Amital never believed that he had a monopoly on truth.

And our own Conservative Movement – what is one of the most common criticisms of Conservative Judaism: people don’t know where we stand on given issues. More often than not, on contentious issues, our Committee on Jewish Law and Standards offers contradictory opinions. It drives us crazy, sometimes, it drives me crazy often, and I am more than a little involved in our Movement, but I wouldn’t want it any other way. Why? Because uncertainty is fundamental to the human condition, because, like Rashi, we don’t have all the answers. We have to struggle, we have to study, we have to give it our best shot – but the best we can come up with sometimes is “maybe,” and leave it at that.

What all this comes to tell us is never to be too sure of ourselves. The Talmudic sages certainly weren’t. They recognized the *teyku*, the unresolved question. They understood that even King Solomon, who knew more than anyone else, didn’t have all the answers. The sages recognized that uncertainties and unanswered questions would remain, at least until the return of Elijah the Prophet, until the coming of the Messiah.

In an age of religious extremism, when acts of unspeakable evil are committed in the name of faith, the example modeled by Rashi of avoiding a sense of certainty, is one desperately needed in so many parts of our world today.

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

Of course, the uncertainties that challenge us are not only in the realm of ritual and religious tradition. Sometimes, they cut to the core of life itself. During my Rabbinical School years, a young, brilliant Talmud teacher became terribly ill. Severely disabled, barely able to walk, he continued to teach. Just as he seemed to be responding to treatments, he suffered a massive stroke one Shabbat and died.

The day of the funeral, afternoon classes were cancelled, but morning sessions continued. I attended my Talmud class as usual. My teacher, who was also Hillel Hyman's teacher, could barely begin the *shiur*. The words were choked with tears. But as he continued with the words of the Mishnah we were studying, his voice grew more steady: “הזהב קונה את הכסף...” Then the message began to sink in – a message that has remained with me every day since. True, the questions of the moment were unanswerable. Why this brilliant young, wonderful Jew had to suffer and leave children fatherless, we would never know. But what could we do about it? We could stop – we could give up the game because we didn't understand, or didn't like the rules – or we could study, we could learn, we could remain part of the continuum of our tradition by refusing to allow unanswerable questions to deter us from continuing to question, to probe, to struggle, to hope, to dream, to pray, to fight, to love, to give, to care.

Earlier, in my discussion of Rashi, I mentioned that there were two unexpected tendencies in his commentaries. The first, I have already dealt with, that of a vital admission of not having all the answers. The second occurs in three places in his commentary to the Talmud. In the midst of Rashi's commentary, we read: “כאן נפטר רבינו – here our teacher died.” Rashi did not live to complete his commentary to the Babylonian Talmud. In Baba Batra, the commentary was completed by the Rashbam, Rashi's grandson. In Makkot, it was Rashi's son-in-law, Rabbi Yehuda ben Natan, who completed the work. In both these instances, Rashi's commentary

is clearly superior. He could not be fully replaced. His brilliance was unique in history.

But even in Rashi's death, he remains our teacher. His grandson, his son-in-law, picked up where he had left off. We were diminished, but we were not vanquished. Life would go on. Thousands upon thousands of commentaries would continue to be written, into our own time, and without question, beyond.

But even in Rashi's death, he remains our teacher, in reminding us that we are the inheritors of an ancient tradition in which we seek to add to the understanding of previous generations, filling in some of the blanks they left us, while leaving our unanswered questions, our uncertainties for the generations to follow as part of the eternal continuum of Jewish learning. More important, he reminds us, in an age of unbridled extremism and intolerance, in which politics, faith, attitudes and values are polarized, in which shouting over each other takes precedence over talking with each other, in which the *Beit Hillel* model of respecting, studying and appreciating opinions with which we disagree becomes ever illusive – in such times, a measure of uncertainty, humility and respect can go a long way in leading us to a better place. Perhaps the Prophet Micah, more than two-and-a-half millennia, said it best: “הַגִּיד לְךָ אָדָם מֵה־טוֹב וּמֵה־יְהוָה דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ כִּי אִם־עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד וְהִצַּנֵּעַ לֶכֶת עִם־אֱלֹהֶיךָ:” - You have been told what the Lord demands of you – only to uphold justice, to love kindness and and to walk humbly with your God.”