

**רש"י: An Appreciation** – Dedicated in honor of his recent 900<sup>th</sup> *yahrzeit*

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Introduction

רש"י, the great teacher of all Israel, passed away 900 years ago, on the 29<sup>th</sup> day of תמוז, 1105 CE (4865 AM). His historic *yahrzeit* was recently commemorated by Jews and gentiles alike, in his native country of France and throughout the world.

During his relatively short lifetime – he died at the age of 65 – רש"י authored a concise, beautifully written and widely accepted commentary to the entire תורה, most of נ"ך,<sup>1</sup> and almost all of the תלמוד בבלי. רש"י was also a communal leader, who guided the Jews of Troyes, France, as well as many others.

רש"י's legacy extended long beyond his own years, through his own writings, teachings and rulings, together with those of his descendents. Over the next few pages we will explore רש"י's life more deeply, and see how he truly became the רבן של ישראל.

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יהודי אשכנז: An Historic Overview

Organized Jewish life in the "Ashkenazic"<sup>2</sup> lands of Germany and France<sup>3</sup> began, according to tradition,<sup>4</sup> approximately 2500 years ago, during the seventy year period that separated the destruction of the 1<sup>st</sup> בית המקדש<sup>5</sup> and the construction of the 2<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>6</sup> Little is known about the early history of these presumably small Jewish communities. However, beginning in the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, during the peaceful and prosperous reign of Charlemagne (768-814 CE), we hear of a flourishing Jewish community in Western Europe.<sup>7</sup>

As was the case for most Jewish communities positioned outside of בבל<sup>8</sup> during the Dark Ages, the Jews from Ashkenazic lands lacked their own widely recognized Talmudic scholars. For centuries, they were dependent on the rulings of רבנים who lived far beyond their immediate areas. That was, until Rabbi Kalonymos, originally of Lucca, Italy, was invited to France by Charlemagne around the year 787 CE. His coming ushered in a new era of learning and distinction for Ashkenazic Jewry.

<sup>1</sup> Prophets and the Hagiographa, or Writings

<sup>2</sup> From the Hebrew word for Germany

<sup>3</sup> Jews in these lands were concentrated in three primary areas: 1) The Rhineland – adjacent to the Rhine River in modern Germany – most famous examples are the cities of Mainz / Mayence ("Magence"), Speyer ("Shapira"), and Worms ("Vermaiza"); 2) Champagne / Northern France – in the general vicinity of Troyes (pronounced "T'wa") and Paris; 3) Provence / French Riviera, in Southern France, bordering Spain.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by the author of ספר מאירת עינים, or סמ"ע. See The Complete Tisha B'Av Service, Artscroll Publications, 1989, pp. 273ff

<sup>5</sup> Temple in Jerusalem

<sup>6</sup> These Jews refused to return to ארץ ישראל following Koresh's declaration of return. Their response to Ezra's urging was, "You stay where you are in the great Jerusalem, and we will continue to stay where we are in our little Jerusalem."

<sup>7</sup> This state of affairs would continue during the reigns of Charlemagne's successors, Louis the Pious (814-840 CE) and Charles the Bald (840-877 CE)

<sup>8</sup> Persia or Parthia, home of the world's largest Jewish community and many leading שיבות

Over the next few centuries, Ashkenazic Jewish scholarship continued to develop. The luminary who really helped to thrust this community into the Torah limelight was רבינו גרשום, known to his fellow Jews as “מאור הגולה” or “Light of the Exile”.<sup>9</sup> רבינו גרשום, who became known as the spiritual father for Ashkenazic Jewry, was of the last גאונים, and a contemporary of רב האי גאון. רבינו גרשום headed the ישיבה in Mainz, Germany, and would directly influence the subsequent era of the ראשונים. Many of רש"י's own teachers<sup>10</sup> were disciples of רבינו גרשום.

In addition to his teaching and writing,<sup>11</sup> רבינו גרשום gained prominence through the issuance of חרמים, or bans, against those who practiced polygamy<sup>12</sup> and those who read others' correspondences without permission (גניבת דעת). The second ruling ensured the privacy of business transactions between Jewish communities. רבינו גרשום also decreed that a woman had to agree to a divorce before a man could give her a גט.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, he forbade Jews to remind forced Jewish converts to Christianity who had since returned to the Jewish community of their shameful past.<sup>14</sup>

### רש"י: His Life and Times

Shortly after the death of רבינו גרשום, a new leader was born who would further the cause of Jewish piety and scholarship. That man was רש"י. רש"י, which is an acronym for רבי שלמה יצחקי,<sup>15</sup> was born in Troyes, France,<sup>16</sup> in 1040 CE.

Two legends surround רש"י's birth. The first involves his father, a jewel merchant who possessed a particularly valuable stone. Local Church officials heard of the stone and made numerous attempts to purchase it for use in their service. Each time they were rebuffed. Finally, they convinced רש"י's father to travel with them on a boat, with the intention of forcibly taking the stone from him. When he realized what they were about to do, he threw the stone into the water, thereby forfeiting his wealth and even his life. In return for this extraordinary act of מסירת נפש,<sup>17</sup> a Voice rang out from שמים, announcing that he would merit a son that would illuminate the world.

Another legend places רש"י's pregnant mother in the city of Worms, Germany. Once, as she was walking the city's narrow streets, she was imperiled by an oncoming horseman, who was about to trample her to death. Out of desperation, she pressed against

<sup>9</sup> “רבינו גרשום, may the memory of the righteous and the holy be a blessing, who enlightened the eyes of the exiled, and from whose mouth we all live. All the exiles of Europe are the students of his students.” (From רש"י's writings)

<sup>10</sup> R' Yaakov ben Yakar, R' Yitzchak HaLevi, and R' Yitzchak ben Yehuda

<sup>11</sup> רבינו גרשום edited much of the תלמוד בבלי, correcting numerous errors that had crept into the text. He also authored a commentary to many מסכתות (tractates) within ש"ס, of which only his commentary to מסכת ברכות remains.

<sup>12</sup> The first ruling was revolutionary. Whereas polygamy continued amongst Sephardic Jews, רבינו גרשום's decree against it became binding for all Ashkenazic Jews, establishing a major cultural split between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jewry.

<sup>13</sup> Document of divorce

<sup>14</sup> רבינו גרשום lived during a period of intensified Christian persecution. During these years he penned numerous סליחות (supplications) and קינות (dirges) describing the frightful persecution. His own son had been forcibly baptized, and did not openly return to Judaism before his untimely passing.

<sup>15</sup> Or son of Isaac. Also an acronym for רבן של ישראל, Master of Israel

<sup>16</sup> Capital city of Champagne in Northern France which attracted merchants from many countries

<sup>17</sup> Self-sacrifice