

## **A Short Study Guide to *The Commentators' Bible***

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Studying Torah with *The Commentators' Bible: The JPS Miqra'ot Gedolot* will open a new world of exploration for you. While you may have read other, more modern commentaries in English, perhaps in synagogue, for example, you probably have not encountered the breadth of medieval Jewish commentary that you will find in this volume. Studying passages alongside these writers will show you unexpected ways of understanding the biblical text. It will lead to new insights – some from the commentators' words, some from ideas their remarks will spark in your imagination.

At first, the commentaries may seem a strange and forbidding literature, as difficult to grasp as the Torah itself. This study guide aims to help you find your way through the landscape of commentary presented in *The Commentators' Bible*. It offers tools for understanding the commentators and for using them to enhance your appreciation of the Torah text. Focusing on the four primary commentators in *The Commentators' Bible*, the guide provides background on the milieu in which each commentator wrote, his primary concerns in approaching the Torah text, and the degree to which his comments emphasize *peshat* (the straightforward contextual meaning of the text) or *derash* (the interpretative meaning). (See page 343 of *The Commentators' Bible* for more on *peshat* and *dersash*.)

This guide also discusses ways of working with commentary to enhance understanding of the biblical text. Every student of classical commentary faces the challenge of finding the implicit question that gave rise to a specific comment. One of the greatest Jewish Bible teachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Nechama Leibowitz, used to ask her students to figure out “what’s bothering Rashi?” We will explore the kinds of questions the commentators ask. (In *The Commentators' Bible* itself, Isaac Abarbanel will pose explicit questions, but mostly the commentators will not tell you *why* they’ve decided to comment.) We will look at ways of deducing the question that provoked a given comment. We will explore the ways in which our commentators offer similar answers to one another, and the ways in which they differ from one another. That will lead to a consideration of what it means when the commentators ask questions very different from the ones that occur to us. Examples from a narrative section and a legal section will lead

us to a brief discussion of what modern readers gain from studying the Torah along with medieval commentaries.

### ***The Four Commentators***

We begin with Rashi, to whom Jews for centuries have turned to first, to answer their questions about the Pentateuch. Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (most often known by his acronym, Rashi) lived in northern France from 1040–1105. After studying with the leading rabbinic scholars of his day in the Rhineland, Rashi returned to his hometown of Troyes. There he taught students Talmud and wrote his great commentaries on the Bible and the Babylonian Talmud.

It helps to understand Rashi not only as a commentator, but also as a teacher. He wrote with the intention of helping students master the way the rabbis of the period of the Talmud understood the Torah. As we read his Torah commentary, we understand how the rabbis of Judaism's classical period interpreted the founding text of Jewish tradition. While there are other possible readings of many verses, Rashi asks interesting questions and often provides answers that would not occur to you or me.

While Rashi has the clear, direct manner of a good teacher, his commentary does not address the beginner. Rashi assumes that the reader already grasps the often subtle problem in the text, and that the reader knows a lot of rabbinic literature. He writes in a concise style that challenges us to deduce what he is saying between the lines. Moderns must often work harder to uncover the question that gave rise to his comment than to grasp the comment itself. Doing that work carries rewards. Sometimes, Rashi helps us notice subtleties that would otherwise elude us. At others, Rashi presents us with an understanding of why Jewish tradition interprets a verse in a particular way—even if we do not find it the most obvious reading of the text. Rashi's commentary summarizes the *peshat* of the Torah.

The next commentator is Rashbam, an acronym of Rabbi Samuel ben Meir. Also a resident of northern France, Rashbam was Rashi's grandson. In his time, Jewish scholars re-examined the biblical text, seeking to understand it for its own sake, rather than to further the classical rabbinic understanding. Rashbam's primary claim is that the homiletical interpretation of the Torah, and the derivation of laws, (known as *derash*) is

already complete. What remains is to explain what the Torah says in its own terms – the type of interpretation known as *peshat*. With cleverness and agility, Rashbam does just this. Below, when we explore specific examples, we will see how his approach differs from that of his famous grandfather.

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra lived at the same time as Rashbam, but came from the milieu of Muslim Spain, very different from that of Christian France. Influenced by Muslim scholarship of the Arabic language and Muslim scriptures, Jews in Ibn Ezra's time and place engaged in deep exploration of the grammar of biblical Hebrew, going far beyond earlier research. Jewish scholars also learned to interpret the Bible within its own literary and linguistic context. Abraham ibn Ezra offers one of the most rational of the medieval commentaries. He explores the precise meaning of Hebrew words in great depth, and he also insists that any interpretation conform to the standards of reason. But he also leavens his commentary with his sharp wit. (One of the pleasures of studying Ibn Ezra's work lies in reading the clever insults he tosses at those he thinks misread the text.) While grasping the details of his linguistic comments can be daunting, his rationalism and attention to detail hold great appeal for contemporary readers.

Chronologically last among the primary commentators in our volume is Ramban or Nahmanides, Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, who lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Ramban introduces to Torah commentary the mystical teachings of the Kabbalah and offers several levels of interpretation. Ramban engages Rashi and Ibn Ezra – often citing their comments – at the level of *peshat*. He regularly goes beyond the debate over *peshat* meaning to interpret the text as an allegory, or to offer the mystical meaning. (He often calls this interpretation “according to the way of Truth,” or “the True interpretation.” Studying Ramban can supplement our own search for religious meaning in the Torah.

### ***Studying with Commentaries***

As when one approaches any unfamiliar genre of literature, it helps to have a procedure for studying the medieval Torah commentaries. This section of the study guide suggests ways of working with the commentaries to enhance understanding of the text itself.

The writers anthologized in *The Commentators' Bible* rarely spell out what problems they discern in the Torah text. (The exception is Abarbanel, who, as you can see, lists all his questions at the beginning of a section, before offering solutions.) As students, we face the challenge of working out what question the commentator asked himself that led to the response he provides. One way to think about studying these commentaries is to imagine yourself playing a variation of the familiar game *Jeopardy*. Like a contestant on the show, you must read a statement and provide the question that statement answers.

Here is a straightforward example. In chapter 3 of Exodus, God commissions Moses to tell Pharaoh to free the Israelite slaves. Hesitating to accept the responsibility, Moses asks a number of questions. In 3:13, he says, “When I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?” God’s response in the next verse is both famous and mysterious, in a way that the NJPS translation captures: “And God said to Moses, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.” He continued, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites, ‘Ehyeh sent me to you.’”

Each commentator interprets this verse. Rashi says,

“‘I will be’ with you in this trouble ‘as I will be’ with you when you are enslaved by other kingdoms. – Moses said to Him, “Master of the Universe! You want me to let them know that they will have more troubles? One trouble at a time is enough for them!” God replied, “You have spoken well. Just say **Ehyeh**, the first ‘I will be.’”

Here Rashi actually answers two separate questions. The first grows out of the unusual language of the verse. The name God gives, Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh, is a strange double phrase. The word “ehyeh” literally translates as “I will be.” Rashi’s comment (based on an ancient rabbinic source) teaches that one “ehyeh” refers to God’s help for Israel in the current trouble of Egyptian slavery. The second “ehyeh” promises God’s help in future troubles. Hence the underlying question is: Why does God reveal a double name? An editor’s note in *The Commentators' Bible* explains the second part of Rashi’s comment. There he answers the question, If God’s name is Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh, why does God instruct Moses to tell Israel, “Ehyeh sent me to you”?

Rashbam's comment addresses a similar question. Notice how he stays closer than Rashi to the context of the verse. He omits any reference to future troubles in Israelite history, simply explaining God's remark as an answer to both parts of Moses' question in verse 13. Ibn Ezra, with his sensitivity to nuances of language, offers this: "The meaning of "Ehyeh," as He explained, is "asher-ehyeh" – that is, "I [always] Am." He, too, wonders about the doubling of the word "ehyeh" in the divine name.

Ramban's comments are too long to quote extensively here. As you read through his remarks on 3:14, you will notice that he, too, wonders exactly how God answers Moses' questions, and how to understand the divine name. In the first part of the comment, Ramban reviews the midrash cited by Rashi, and then cites two others. Each midrash allows Ramban to introduce a different aspect of God's nature. In the second part of his comment, beginning "**Thus shall you say to the Israelites,**" Ramban delves further into theology, including mystical ideas about the specific letters that spell the divine name in Hebrew. This comment nicely illustrates his typical interests. Implicitly, Ramban goes beyond the *peshat* question of what Ehyeh-asher-ehyeh means to asking what we can learn from the dialogue in this verse about the nature of the divine.

This example illustrates an aspect of studying commentary that you will rediscover frequently in your explorations. Often, all the commentators respond to the same issue in the Torah text. Yet the same question evokes a fascinating array of responses. As readers, we experience the commentators engaging in a kind of conversation with one another. As we consider their answers and weigh their success at improving our understanding of the Torah, we join them in the discussion of what the verses mean. You may find it useful to think of them as simply more people in the room studying Torah with you, all of you learning from one another.

Our illustration shows one type of question the commentators frequently address, the meaning of an unusual phrase. With great sensitivity to the precise language of the text, they ask many questions about wording, from which they derive many insights into meaning. Very often, the commentators also address the inverse of this problem: a word or phrase strikes them as superfluous. Operating on the traditional principle that every word in the Torah is there for a reason, they find ways of understanding the need for what appears, at a glance, to be extra. Other comments may flow from a lacuna, a gap in the

text, which the authors try to fill. If you wonder about information that the text does not provide, the commentators may well suggest solutions. Close readings of individual words and phrases do not prevent the commentators from exploring the religious or spiritual meaning of the Torah text. Engaging with them in detailed analysis will, in the long run, help you consider the deeper questions that occur to you.

It's not unusual for us to have questions that the commentators do not address. In that case, we may need to rely on our own resources and creative thinking to find answers. Experience with the commentaries collected in *The Commentators' Bible* may develop our skills as readers in ways that help us find more, and more interesting, answers to the questions the Torah raises for us. Even finding their answers unsatisfactory can lead us to unexpected new ideas.

Earlier, we looked at an illustration of how the commentaries discuss a narrative passage. To further our understanding of both the commentators and how we might approach their work, let's examine a legal passage, Exodus 21:1–6.

These verses are among the first laws Moses receives after the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai. They begin a long legal code that covers several chapters. It is interesting to note that both Rashbam and Ibn Ezra write introductions before they explain the passage verse by verse. Consistent with his *peshat* approach outlined above, Rashbam lets the reader know that he will explain the verses “according to common sense”, but this does not mean that the actual *halakhah* (traditional Jewish law) is anything different than the talmudic rabbis decided. For instance, on verse 4, “If his master gave him a wife,” Rashbam comes to a different conclusion than Rashi, who follows the halakhic tradition. Ibn Ezra, for his part, argues that the laws follow a logical arrangement; any time that we cannot discern a reason for the order of presentation, “we shall blame the deficiency on ourselves.” Ramban proposes an interesting way of reading various laws in chapter 21; he says they are expansions on individual commandments among the ten revealed to all Israel standing at Sinai. Ibn Ezra and Ramban discuss the same question about the identity of the wife provided by the master to the slave; each offers a plausible reason for disagreeing with Rashi. Here we see the commentators engaging in a “discussion” across history; Ramban says in so many words, “Rashi’s comment is not precisely correct.”

These brief examples, which you will want to explore in more detail, demonstrate how modern readers can engage in productive study with the medieval commentators. We enter their conversation, building on their ideas to form new links in the chain of tradition. Through their insights, we grow in understanding of the Torah text. In the process, we may absorb some of the awe and reverence in which these commentators held this text, deepening our understanding not only of the Bible, but even of ourselves.