

- **Source 1:** Address delivered on Speech Day of Jews' College (*Beit HaMidrash LeRabbanim*) in London (13th April, 1924)

1.1.

I feel it therefore my duty to express first of all my heartfelt thanks to the Council of Jews' College for so kindly inviting me to preside over this assembly. Sir Adolph Tuck thought that I was *this year* the ablest person to take the chair! At the time I wondered if it was not the rule since the College was founded to have a lady to preside and therefore there was not such a happening before, then why should I have been this honoured? On the other hand, why did it not happen in the whole of the sixty-eight years? To this I found an answer, that the leaders may have thought, that the Chairmanship of the Speech Day is like the *קטרת* (incense) in the Temple, as the Gemara in ע"ב says: once in sixty or seventy years the remains of the incense [of every year] used to accumulate to half the quantity needed for one year), and if the remains are kasher, and the halves are kasher, then a woman may also come in!

1.2.

We have a precedent in the Bible, that in troublous times Barak told Deborah: "If thou wilt go with me, then I will go, but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go" (Jud. iv. 8). After the victory, Deborah addressed the men of Israel, and said (Jud. v. 2f.): *בפרוע פרעות בישראל*, I will apply this to the present occasion, *בהתנדב עם*, when the men invited me to take the lead today, for which I say *ברכו ה'*. And I will continue in the words of Deborah *שמעו מלכים* "Hear, O Kings" *רבנן* "who are the kings? The Rabbis; *האזינו רזונים* "hearken ye great men, *אנכי לה'* "I am the Lord".

1.3.

There was a particular thing which women used to do in Talmudic times [...] which Rashi explains [...] the women used to anoint the heads of the disciples with oil, which I think was symbolical of [...] the oil of the Torah, and only women had this privilege, because as the Gemara *ברכות י"ז ע"א* says: What is the *זכות* (merit) of the women? It is the taking of their children to the Beth Hamidrash.

FLORA SASSOON

Flora (Frecha) Sassoon (1859, Bombay-1936, London) grew up in India, within an extraordinarily wealthy family of Baghdadi origin. She was a philanthropist, a business woman and a Torah scholar. She corresponded with important rabbinic figures like Rav Yosef Haim (Rav Ben Ish Chai), who even wrote a riddle with her Hebrew name *פרחה*, or Rav Itzhak Nissim (Chief Rabbi of Israel), among many others. She also corresponded with public figures like the famous Sephardi intellectual Abraham Shalom Yahuda. Flora Sassoon was fluent in Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, Hindustani, English, French and German.

1.4.

This place therefore resembles a life-giving well, which supplies strength and vitality to our communities far and near

1.5.

[...] one is surprised that in *our* age, which sees in learning and education the highest glory and greatest pride of national life, our brethren and sisters, Jews and Jewesses, should with indifference turn away from our unparalleled Torah and literatures, our glorious past and history, jeopardizing the future of our holiest heritage, our religion and teachings which were the great aim of the pious founders.

1.6.

The sons of the Torah, those who learn and teach the Law, who spread the word of God, they are the real guardians of our people.

➤ **Source 2:** "Rashi". Article published in *The Jewish Forum*. 1930

2.1. Presentation

The charm of Rashi's character cannot escape any student of his standard works. His familiar *ve-ani omer* (and I say) in controversy or dispute is an instructive instance of his mildness and modesty, when compared with other writers. It is true that such passages contain contradictions of roles accepted by greatly renowned masters, yet one feels on such occasions that a man imbued with the highest degree of piety and the most sacred longing for truth is speaking to us throughout his commentaries, whether of the Bible or the Talmud

2.2. Rashi's relations to his authority figures

Interesting and instructive are Rashi's relations to his teachers. Rashi often refers to the usages of his teachers which he himself adopted, and to their explanations with which he fully concurred. Yet there are instances which show us Rashi's independence of thought. He openly criticized his teachers' decisions and explanations. For instance, in a letter addressed to R. Isaac b. Yehudah, one of his teachers, he claims: "I heard of you that you have forbidden a Jew to send his wine which was sealed with one seal, by a gentile, whilst the law is established according to R. Eliezer who is no afraid of the seals being forged. Is that report true?" On New Year's day Rashi used to say *Sheheheyenu* on both days, although his teachers decided to the contrary. [...]

2.3. Jewish-non-Jewish relations

- Some sources refer to Rashi and his court in Troyes [...] in such connection we read "and we explained many times that the remnant of Israel should not mislead any human being, neither a Christian nor a Moslem". It is a wonderful testimony for the ethical teachings of Judaism and the high standard of moral ideals that such sentiments could be read in works and be practiced by children of the 11th century, who experienced nothing but hatred and persecutions from their neighbors. Yet Rash forbade the distribution of Purim presents to gentile slaves, not because of misanthropy but in order that the Jewish poor should not be neglected.
- In one case we hear of the rule of a city imprisoning a leading Jew who was entrusted by all his fellow Jews with their affairs. Another *Responsum* supplies information about the relations of Jews to non-Jews. A non-Jew entered the house of a Jew and drank from his wine. Interesting is the remark: "And the gentile was not acquainted with the ways of the Jews", meaning the non-Jews who lived in the neighborhood or near a Jewish settlement were acquainted with, and respected, Jewish customs.

2.4. Character and sentiments of Rashi's *responsa*: Rashi as a protector of women's rights and dignity

- He emphasizes that since our earliest history, our ancestors were especially careful that Jewish girls and women should not be put to shame or material disadvantage. Rashi concludes his letter with the following words. Which shall be translated here: "And such a man (who puts a Jewish girl to shame) has to be fined and chastised according to Jewish law. And the scholar who supports such a man does not do justice to his learning, the he is strengthening the hands of evil doers, and Heaven has deprived him of honor in Israel, and the most apparent laws of the Torah were hidden from him so that he did not understand their depth. And to them that rebuke shall be delight, and a good blessing shall come upon them. Solomon ben Isaac"
- "This man has shown his evil character and proved that he is unworthy of being called a child of our father Abraham, whose principle was to love his fellow creatures in general, an example which a Jew must imitate. [...] for even those who deny God are merciful to their wives and endeavor to show mercy and love"

2.4. Religious standard and social position of women

A passage in one of the many works coming from the school of Rashi, furnishes us with some welcome material. We are told that once the Feast of Purim happened to fall on a Sunday. On such occasions, then as now, the fast of Esther was kept on the previous Thursday. Now, one Jewish lady who had to accompany the wife of the governor of the city on horseback, and consequently belonged to the upper circle of the place or province, inquired of Rashi whether she might postpone her fast to the next day, owing to fatigue. Rashi decided, although the Fast of Esther is neither of Biblical origin nor a Rabbinic injunction, yet it is a well-established *minhag* which has to be observed. [...] [S]he may fast on Friday. We see, hence, that even great ladies who took a prominent part in social life and moved in the highest circles of the land, did not neglect even such customs as fasting on *Ta'anith Esther*.. Looking back into the dark Middle Ages, we see the daughters of Israel in the castles and mansions of the great, and even there adhering with all the fervor of their souls and nobility of their hearts to their ancient and hallowed religion. [...] If history teaches one thing, it is that nobility of soul and deep piety go together.

2.5. Impact of Rashi on the Sephardi world

- By different writers and different teachers he is called by various names. [...] In Spain and even in the East, we meet him under the name of R. Solomon Tsartathi, or Ba'al Hatsarfathi, and shorter, Hatsarfathi. Teachers in the south of Europe, like both the Rabbis Isaiah of Trani, grandfather and grandson, call him by the honored title Hamoreh, i.e. The Teacher. [...] Wherever we turn, whether to Jews in Persia or Yemen, East or West, North or South, Rashi's literary works guide them, and they are studied and commented on. [...]
- These works are known under the name of *Tosafoth al Hatorah*. I mention here one of these, not known hitherto, named *Moshab Zekenim*, written by Samuel David ibn Shoham, in the year 1474. The work itself is much older, and contains about 143 names of authors and books, some of which are not known from other sources (MS. Sassoon, No. 409).
- Rashi's influence on posterity can be illustrated from an author who hailed from the Maghreb, lived in Upper Galilee (Safed), and wrote in the second half of the 16th century. He is known to bibliographers and scholars interested in the history of the Jewish Calendar, but his great work, the work of his life, is still in manuscript. He wrote a commentary on the whole Bible, which up to now is almost unknown. Manuscripts Sassoon, Nis. 159 and 160, contain the Pentateuch, *Haftaroth*, Give Scrolls besides the Scroll of Antiochus, and the Hagiographa, respectively. The third, on the Prophets, the companion of these two, is among the manuscripts in the British Museum. The work contains a revision of R. Se'adyah Gaon's Arabic translation of the whole Bible. [...] This author [was] Issachar b. Mordecai b. Susan el-Maghrebi, who called himself a descendant of the Tribe on Benjamin, **refers very often in his revision of the Arabic to Rashi's Bible commentaries.**

2.6. Great works that have been lost: Arabic language and Jewish tradition

- The introduction [written by el-Maghrebi] enlarges our knowledge and furnishes information about many important problems of Jewish-Arabic literature, the state of education in the 16th century, and last but not least, about Aramaic-speaking Jews of Mesopotamia in this age. In his list of Jewish-Arabic works which adorned the library of our scholar in Safed, we find Abraham b. Maimonides' *Kafayat el-'Abadah*, Tanhum Yerushali's *Murshad el-Kafi*, Sherira Gaon's *Explanation of Difficult Words in the Talmud*, Samuel Hannaghid's *Mukhtatsar Hatalmud*, and Ibn Jonah's Dictionary. The importance of this report, although it sounds like a dry catalogue, cannot be minimized when we consider that four out of these six books belong to the vast literature of the past, now almost lost.
- Similarly deplorable is the loss of Se'adyah Gaon's Arabic Explanation of all the Difficult Words in the Six Orders of the Mishnah, of which only that on Berachot survived and appeared in print. [...] Most of these writings, being written in Arabic, were not to be found in Rashi's school, therefore they have no actual bearing on our subject, yet they may be mentioned here in this connection owing to their great importance.

2.7. Judeo-Arabic masters

- Susani compares the Gaon's explanation with that of Rashi. Both were taught in the schools, and Rashi's commentary was given the preference. The reason for this was, that even old scholars could not understand the vocabulary and the paraphrase of Se'adyah's *Sharh* (explanation).
- I shall surely not be misunderstood if I close these likes with deep gratitude to the memory of our great master who taught and teaches, "whose lips are moving in his grave", when Rashi's words are spoken [...]

2.8. Closure

Rashi's words and works properly appreciated and studied are the best means of bringing about a revival of Jewish feeling and culture and bringing home to the sons and daughters of Israel the beauty and value of this heritage.

➤ **Source 3**

Although Jewish cultural-religious creativity began to flourish in Northern France and the Rhineland ("Ashkenaz") in the eleventh century, it was not until 700 years later -sometime in the eighteenth century- that numerical parity was reached between the Yiddish speaking ("Ashkenazic") Jews of Central and Eastern Europe and the Arabic and Ladino speaking Jews of the Ottoman Empire and North Africa. Thus, for 90% of their historical timeline, Jews and Judaism were completely or mostly Middle Eastern and Mediterranean; yet today they are perceived by many -both Jews and non-Jews- as an Occidental people and culture, and their history and development are presented through Eurocentric eyes. (Zvi Zohar, *Rabbinic Creativity in the Modern Middle East*)

➤ **Source 4**

What I have sought to suggest is that this value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary. (Hayden White, *The content of the form*)

➤ **Source 5**

- And this raises the suspicion that narrative in general, from the folktale to the novel, from the annals, tho the fully realized "history", has to do with the topics of law, legality, legitimacy, or, more generally, *authority*. (Hayden White, "The value of narrativity in the representation of reality")
- Every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to *moralize* the events of which it treats. [...] [N]arrativity certainly in factual storytelling and probably in fictional storytelling as well, is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine. (*ibid*)

➤ **Source 6**

- Obligations are only binding on human beings. There are no obligations for collectivities, as such. But they exist for all human beings who constitute, serve, command or represent a collectivity, in that part of their existence which is related to the collectivity as in that part which is independent of it. (Simone Weill, "The needs of the soul")
- The object of any obligation, in the realm of human affairs, is always the human being as such . There exists an obligation towards every human being for the sole reason that he or she is a human being, without any other condition requiring to be fulfilled, and even without any recognition of such obligation on the part of the individual concerned (*ibid*)

➤ **Source 7**

- That reality is the unique source of all the good that can exist in this world : that is to say, all beauty, all truth, all justice, all legitimacy, all order, and all human behavior that is mindful of obligations. Those minds whose attention and love are turned towards that reality are the sole intermediary through which good can descend from there and come among men. (Simone Weill, "Draft of a statement of human obligations")
- The combination of these two facts - the longing in the depth of the heart for absolute good, and the power, though only latent, of directing attention and love to a reality beyond the world and of receiving good from it - constitutes a link which attaches every man without exception to that other reality. Whoever recognizes that reality recognizes also that link. Because of it, he holds every human being without any exception as something sacred to which he is bound to show respect. This is the only possible motive for universal respect towards all human beings. Whatever formulation of belief or disbelief a man may choose to make, if his heart inclines him to feel this respect, then he in fact also recognizes a reality other than this world's reality. Whoever in fact does not feel this respect is alien to that other reality also (*ibid*)