

How To Learn
Peshat Chumash With Rashi
Rashi Derash Chumash

How to Learn Chumash with Rashi

by

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Table of Contents

Page

1	A Thank You
2	Introduction
3	Chapter 1 - How to Read a Verse
7	Chapter 2 - Understanding Rashi's Approach
10	Chapter 3 - Rashi Step-by-Step
12	Chapter 4 - An Example
14	Appendix 1 - Hebrew Alphabet and Numerical Values (Gematria)
15	Appendix 2 - Key Terms in Rashi
17	Appendix 3 - About the Author

A Thank You

You received this ebook as my gift for your subscription to the Thinking Torah blog.

I hope that reading this ebook and using it will help you grow in your Torah learning abilities. It's not always easy, but there is a lot of satisfaction that comes from working hard and reaching an understanding of the text.

The methods that I talk about in this ebook will work for all Torah texts, not just Chumash and Rashi.

In this book I am assuming that you have a familiarity with basic Hebrew grammar.

I want to thank the following people who read and commented on drafts of this ebook:

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I created the word cloud that appears on the cover using Wordle - www.wordle.net.

Please tell your friends about Thinking Torah. If they would like their own copy of this ebook, please ask them to visit the website:
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Introduction

The Chumash is our most fundamental Jewish text. Unfortunately, for many Jews it remains a difficult text to read, learn, and enjoy.

This short ebook will guide you through a step-by-step method to learn any verse in Chumash with Rashi's commentary.

Rashi's Life

Though Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchaki) may be one of the most famous Jews who ever lived, very little is known about his life.

He was born in the year 1040 CE (4800 according to the Jewish calendar). Where was he born? Well, it may have been in Troyes (the capital of Champaign in northern France); Worms, Germany; or Lunel, Provence.

Rashi married in 1055. His wife gave birth to two or three daughters but no sons.

From the years 1057-1065 Rashi travelled to Mainz and Worms in Germany to learn Torah. During this time he returned to his home in Troyes occasionally and then permanently in 1065.

His daughter Yocheved married Rabbi Meir ben Shmuel. She gave birth to Rabbi Shlomo ben Meir (Rashbam) in 1085. In 1100, she gave birth to Rabbi Yaakov ben Meir, generally known as Rabbeinu Tam.

Rashi's daughter Miriam married Rabbi Yehuda ben Natan.

Rashi's grandsons wrote commentaries on the Talmud and are known as the first of the Baalei Tosafots.

Rashi died in Troyes in 1205 CE (4865) at the age of 65.

Rashi's Works

Rashi is most famous for his commentaries on the Chumash and the Talmud.

He also wrote commentaries on Nach and on Midrash Rabbah.

Many people don't realize that Rashi also wrote halachic responsa. We have about 300 of his responsa. They are collected in works such as: *Machzor Vitry*, *Sefer HaPardes*, *Sefer HaOrah*, *Siddur Rashi*, *Issur V'Heter*, and *Sheilot U'Teshuvot*.

Chapter 1 - How to Read a Verse

What follows is a step-by-step guide to learn any verse in Chumash without reference to an English translation.

These suggested steps, with slight modification, can be used to learn any text.

The method that I'm teaching in this chapter will require you to read each verse many times. This repetition is one of the keys to mastering the verse.

1. Choose your verse(s)

It is usually best to initially read more than one verse. Reading several verses will help you understand the context of your chosen passage.

If you are working on a school assignment, then presumably your instructor has assigned several verses. It would be best to read all of the assigned verses at once.

If you are learning on your own, then start by picking several verses to read.

In a hand written Sefer Torah, the scribe will group the text into sections by leaving blank spaces in the text. A printed Chumash may mimic the Sefer Torah and also leave blank spaces. More likely the blank spaces will be indicated by the letter **ו** or **פ**.

It would be ideal to read all the verses in one section of the Chumash as indicated by breaks in the text. If that is too much text, then choose a few of the verses to read together.

2. Read your verses

Slowly read through the text that you selected. It is best to read out loud. Be careful to pronounce each word accurately.

At this time, do not worry about trying to understand the meaning of the words.

Read through the text three or four times. If you are working with a chevruta (study partner) then each of you should take turns reading the text.

Your goal with these readings is to become familiar with the words of the text.

The next few steps will help you gain an understanding of the verse.

3. Look for punctuation hints

Read your verse one more time. This time focus on the punctuation hints in the text.

The Torah scroll that is used in the synagogue contains the Torah text without any punctuation marks. Your printed Chumash has two additions to the Torah text: vowel marks and cantillation (trope) marks.

The vowel marks are the familiar ones used in other Hebrew texts.

The cantillation marks are only used in the printed texts of the Chumash and the rest of Tanach. You can find a complete list of all the cantillation marks in your Chumash.

The cantillation marks tell you:

1. which syllable in the word should be emphasized,
2. which tune (trope) goes with the word, and
3. which words should be grouped together as a unit.

This third function of the cantillation will help you punctuate your verse.

The following table shows how several of the cantillation marks indicate which words should be grouped together. The column on the right tells you the name of the cantillation mark and shows you the symbol. For example, the symbol for “etnachta” is the little upside down wishbone at the end of word.

Function	טעמי המקרא Trope
major pause in the verse	אַתְנַחְתָּא
links the words together	מִנְחַ זְרָקָא
links the words together	מִנְחַ סְגוּלָא
links the words together	מִנְחַ רְבִיעִי
links the words together	פְּשֻטָא זְקַף-קִטּוֹן
links the words together	קִדְמָא וְאַזְלָא

4. Determine who is speaking

If your verse is part of a dialogue, determine who is speaking. Then determine which words were said by each speaker.

You should be aware that at times one person’s words may comprise several verses. There can also be times when more than one person’s words are recorded in a single verse.

Try marking the start and end of any dialogue with quotation marks. Be prepared as you become more familiar with the verse to adjust the quotation marks.

5. Find and translate the verbs

In Hebrew, usually the most significant words in a verse are the verbs.

Read through your verse again and locate all of the verbs. It might be helpful to have a book with standard verb tables handy. For example, the paradigm verb charts in **חוברת הדקדוק** published by Feldheim Publishers are very useful.

Remember that each Hebrew verb is built from a three letter shoresh (root). You need to determine the root of the word you are looking at. Identify if any letters have been added at the beginning of the verb (prefix), at the end of the verb (suffix), or inserted into the verb (infix).

After you eliminate the added letters, you should be left with the three letter shoresh. However, sometimes letters from the shoresh drop out of the verb as it is conjugated. The following chart shows which letters can fall out:

Dropping Letters in Verb Conjugations

ל	ע	פ	Position in Shoresh
ה double letter	ן ן	ן ן	These letters may drop out of the conjugation

Notes: I've used the standard terminology for position:

פ = 1st letter

ע = 2nd letter

ל = 3rd letter

Shoresh ך ל ה - the initial ה often drops.

Shoresh ח ק ל - the initial ל often drops.

Shoresh ן ת ן - the final ן often drops.

You now have the shoresh of your verb. If you don't know the translation of that shoresh, then you will need to look it up.

But remember, you don't really care about the translation of the shoresh. You care about the translation of the word in your verse. So figure out what role each added letter plays in the word and how adding it back into the word changes the translation.

You now have the translation of your word.

6. Translate the other words in the verse

You now need to translate the remaining words from your verse. These will mostly be nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and prepositions.

The nouns and adjectives you should be able to find in a dictionary spelled exactly the way they are written in the verse. That is, you don't need to determine a root, just look up the word.

Write down the translation of every word.

You have now translated your verse. However, it probably doesn't sound much like English.

You may need to adjust the order of the words. The standard word order in English is the subject followed by the verb. Hebrew often places the verb before the subject of the sentence.

Also, remember that Hebrew does not have present tense forms of the verb "to be." For your English translation you may need to supply these words: am, are, is.

7. Check your translation

Congratulations! You have translated your verse.

Now check it.

Does your translation make sense with the rest of the narrative that you have already translated?

If not, what part does not seem right? If one of your words had more than one possible translation, then try the verse with one of the alternatives.

At this point you could ask someone who is more fluent in Hebrew to look at your work.

You could also compare your translation with one of the available English translations. Just bear in mind that the published translations are usually not simply literal translations of the text. They often take into account the commentary of Rashi or some other commentator in choosing how to translate a verse.

Chapter 2 - Understanding Rashi's Approach

Now that you know the translation of your verse, it's time to learn Rashi's commentary on the verse.

In general, we say that a verse can be explained in four ways: peshat, derash, remez, or sod. Let's try to understand these terms.

Peshat

This is the simple meaning or plain sense of the text.

Derash

This is a less obvious meaning of the text often taking into account information from outside the text.

Rabbi Yonatan Kolatch explains one of the differences between peshat and derash:

... peshat interpretation must be sensitive to context. That is, the meanings assigned to an individual word or phrase must make sense in the context of the verse, and the interpretation of the verse must make sense in the context of the passage in which it occurs. Derash, on the other hand, often ignores these contextual constraints. It can do this because the derash does not necessarily attempt to supplant the peshat; rather it finds additional information hinted at in the text, thus complementing the peshat but not competing with it.¹

Remez

This is the interpretation of a verse based on ideas that are hinted at or alluded to by the text.

Remez usually relies on devices such as:

Gematria - Assigning a numerical value to each letter and comparing words and phrases based on these values. See Appendix 1 for the numerical value of each letter.

Acronym - Letting each letter of a word stand for a word.

Initial letters - Taking the first letter of each word in a phrase and spelling words with just those letters.

End letters - Taking the last letter of each word in a phrase and spelling words with just those letters.

Anagrams - Rearranging the letters of a word to spell a different word.

Number of words or letters - Finding meaning in the number of words or letters in a phrase.

1. Rabbi Yonatan Kolatch, *Masters of the Word Volume 1* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Publishing, 2006), p. 46. Rabbi Kolatch has a detailed explanation of these four interpretation methods in his book, found on pages 33-54.

Sod

This is the interpretation of a verse based on the secret (sod) which is revealed in the mystical teachings of Kabbalah.

Rashi's Approach

Rashi tells us several times in his commentary on Chumash that he wants to teach the peshat meaning of the verse.

But when we read Rashi's commentary on Chumash, we find that he is often quoting the midrashim of Chazal (our Sages). As the name implies, the midrashim explain the text on the basis of derash.

This seems contradictory. If Rashi is quoting the midrash, doesn't that mean that his approach is derash?!

One of my teachers explained it to me this way: Rashi uses the derash of Chazal that solves the problem in peshat.

**Rashi uses
the derash of Chazal
that solves
the problem in peshat.**

Problems in Peshat

One way to learn the Chumash (perhaps even the best way) is to start asking questions as you read the text.

Now here's an interesting thing. If you do this you'll probably write down a long list of questions. However, when you look at Rashi on those verses, you may be shocked to see that he doesn't answer very many of your questions.

Does that mean you asked the wrong questions? No. It just means that you didn't ask the questions that Rashi deals with in his commentary.

Rashi (or any other commentator) doesn't try to answer every possible question that could be asked on the Chumash. Rashi limited himself to solving those problems that make it difficult to understand the peshat of the text.

Here are some textual problems in the text of the Torah that can be the basis of a comment by Rashi:

- Words spelled irregularly
- Semuchim - the juxtaposition of Biblical passages especially when they are not in chronological order
- Details are missing in the text
- Unnecessary detail in the text
- Superfluous information in the text (for example, repetition)
- Extra or missing words
- Grammatical irregularities
- Unusual syntax

Chapter 3 - Rashi Step-by-Step

Here is a step-by-step method for learning one of Rashi's comments. Several of the steps will be similar to what was suggested for learning and translating a verse.

You will often find that Rashi's comment is not printed in Hebrew block letters. Rather, it is printed in a special font known as Rashi script. This font was introduced many years ago to make a distinction between the text and Rashi's comment.

If you are not familiar with Rashi script, a chart comparing Rashi script and block print is included in Appendix 1.

1. Read Rashi's comment

Slowly read through Rashi's comment. It is best to read out loud. Be careful to pronounce each word accurately.

Be sure to include Rashi's opening words (דיבור המתחיל) in your reading. Depending upon which Chumash you are using, these opening words may be in bold print. Often they are key to understanding Rashi's meaning.

At this time, do not worry about trying to understand the meaning of the words.

Read through the text three or four times. If you are working with a chevruta (study partner) then each of you should take turns reading the text.

Your goal with these readings is to become familiar with the words of Rashi's comment. As you go through the next few steps you will gain an understanding of his comment.

2. Look for punctuation hints

Read the Rashi one more time. This time focus on the punctuation hints in the text.

Appendix 2 is a chart of some key terms used by Rashi that you should be on the lookout for.

3. Look for quotations

Once again read Rashi's comment and determine if he is quoting any sources.

Quotations may come from verses before or after your verse or from any other place in Tanach. Also, Rashi will often quote Talmud Bavli and various midrashim.

Sometimes Rashi will weave together his comment with the words of your verse. The more familiar you are with the verse, the easier it is to spot this. That is another reason why I suggest that you read the verse multiple times.

4. Translate Rashi's comment

Using all the tools we talked about earlier when learning a verse, translate Rashi's comment.

5. Analyze Rashi's comment

In general, Rashi does not tell you why he is commenting on a verse. It is now your job to figure that out.

Ask yourself some questions such as:

- What in the text is bothering Rashi?
- How does Rashi's comment solve the problem?
- If he gave more than one solution, how do the solutions differ?

This is a key step to understanding Rashi.

Over the centuries since Rashi wrote his commentary, many scholars have analyzed his work. In their supercommentaries (a commentary on a commentary) they explain what was bothering Rashi. Then the supercommentator will either defend or attack Rashi's solution.

6. Reread the verse based on Rashi's comment

Rashi commented on your verse because there was some problem in peshat. His comment was meant to solve that problem.

Now, read and translate the verse based on Rashi's comment. Rashi's comment should give you a new clarity into the meaning of the text.

Chapter 4 - An Example

Let's look at one verse and a comment by Rashi. The verse I've chosen is Shemot 1:16.

Here's the text of the Chumash:

שמות פרק א
טז וַיֹּאמֶר בְּיַלְדָּךָ אֶת־הַעֲבָרִיּוֹת וּרְאִיתָן עַל־הָאֲבָנִים אִם־בֵּן הוּא וְהַמִּיתָן אֹתוֹ וְאִם־בַּת הוּא וְחִיָּה:

Using the trope marks here is how the verse can be broken into phrases:

וַיֹּאמֶר
בְּיַלְדָּךָ
אֶת־הַעֲבָרִיּוֹת
וּרְאִיתָן עַל־הָאֲבָנִים
אִם־בֵּן הוּא
וְהַמִּיתָן אֹתוֹ
וְאִם־בַּת הוּא
וְחִיָּה:

You can tell from the first word that someone is speaking. From the previous verse, it is Paro speaking to the midwives. It appears that the rest of the verse is Paro's words.

Here is a phrase by phrase literal translation:

And he said,	וַיֹּאמֶר
“When you deliver	בְּיַלְדָּךָ
the Jewish women	אֶת־הַעֲבָרִיּוֹת
and you see them on the birthstool*	וּרְאִיתָן עַל־הָאֲבָנִים
if son he	אִם־בֵּן הוּא
and you will kill him	וְהַמִּיתָן אֹתוֹ
and if daughter she	וְאִם־בַּת הוּא
and she shall live.”	וְחִיָּה:

(* I know, on the blog I said “birthstool” is not a good translation. But we'll just keep it simple here.)

That's almost a good English sentence. We just have to clean up the phrases “if son he” and “and if daughter she.” There is clearly a bit of a problem with word order, needing a form of the verb to be, and choosing the best English word.

With a few tweaks, we now have this translation:

Shemot 1:16 And he said, “When you deliver the Jewish women and you see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, then you will kill him, and if it is a girl, then she shall live.”

Now, let's look at Rashi on this verse.

Rashi makes four comments. The first and last are grammatical points. The second comment is how to understand the phrase **עַל־הָאֲבִנָּיִם**. He tells us it is the place where a woman giving birth sat.

Let's look closely at Rashi's third comment. Here's the comment in Hebrew (text copied from the DBS Torah CD-Rom Library):

אם בן הוא וגו' - לא היה מקפיד אלא על הזכרים שאמרו לו אצטגנינו שעתיד להולד בן המושיע אותם:

Here's my translation of Rashi:

if it is a boy ... - he was only concerned about the males because his astrologers said to him that in the future would be born a boy who would redeem them.

Rashi explains that Paro is telling the midwives to kill the male children for a specific purpose. Paro has been advised that there will (soon) be born a boy who will become the redeemer of the Jewish people. Paro wants to eliminate that redeemer as soon as he is born.

Now you must ask yourself what in the verse is troubling Rashi? If Paro wants to eliminate the Jewish people as a threat, shouldn't he kill all the children? Rashi is bothered by why Paro would kill only the male children.

Here is how we can fit Rashi's explanation of the verse into the verse itself:

And he said: When you deliver the Hebrew women, and you see upon the birth-stool that it is a son, then you shall kill him [(his astrologers having told him that a male would be born who would save Israel)], and if it is a daughter, then she shall live.

That is the translation of the verse by Rabbi Shraga Silverstein in *The Rashi Chumash*². Notice how he has included Rashi's comment in the text as a parenthetical statement.

2. Rabbi Shraga Silverstein, *The Rashi Chumash - Shemot* (Jerusalem: Targum/Feldheim, no year), p. 7. Sadly, I think the set is out of print.

Appendix 1 - Hebrew Alphabet and Numerical Values (Gematria)

Numerical Value	Rashi Script	Block Print
1	א	א
2	ב	ב
3	ג	ג
4	ד	ד
5	ה	ה
6	ו	ו
7	ז	ז
8	ח	ח
9	ט	ט
10	י	י
20	כ,ך	כ,ך
30	ל	ל
40	מ,ם	מ,ם
50	נ,ן	נ,ן
60	ס	ס
70	ע	ע
80	פ,ף	פ,ף
90	צ,ץ	צ,ץ
100	ק	ק
200	ר	ר
300	ש	ש
400	ת	ת

Appendix 2 - Key Terms in Rashi

Translation/Usage	Key Term
I say	אומר אני (א"א)
it is not ... but rather	אין אלא, אינו אלא
don't wonder	אל תתמה
but, rather, however	אלא
if you say	אם תאמר
also here	אף כאן
although	אף על פי (אע"פ)
nevertheless	אף על פי כן (אעפ"כ)
read as a question or surprise	בתמיה
another explanation	דבר אחר (ד"א)
there are many of these in Tanach	הרבה יש במקרא
thus, behold	הרי
and it appears to me	ולי נראה
and it's derash explanation	ומדרשו
and furthermore	ועוד
the plain meaning of the verse is	ופשוטו של מקרא
and our Rabbis explain it	ורבותנו דרשו
this is	זהו
this is its plain meaning	זהו פשוטו
there are many Aggadic explanations	יש אגדות רבות
I would think ... but the text teaches ...	יכול ... תלמוד לומר ...
some say ... and some say ...	יש אומרים ... ויש אומרים
some say	יש שאמרו
wherever the word אאא is used	כל "אאא" שבמקרא
that is to say	כלומר
as	כמו
as its usual meaning	כמשמעו

Translation/Usage	Key Term
just as	כשם ש-
as Targum Onkelos translates	כתרגמו
it is not ... but rather ...	לא ... אלא
only	לא ... אלא
it was only necessary to write	לא היה לו לכתוב אלא
to inform you	להודיעך
there, elsewhere	להלן
according to	לפי
because, since	לפי ש-
therefore	לפיכך
later in the text	לקמן
abbreviated language	לשון קצר
a midrash teaches	מדרש אגדה (מ"א)
what does the text teach?	מה תלמוד לומר?
what is it's significance	מהו, ומהו
from here	מכאן
you are forced (to say)	על כרחך
by means of, through	על ידי (ע"י)
our Sages said	רבותנו אמרו
our Sages stated an explanation	רבותנו דרשו
the verse teaches	תלמוד לומר (ת"ל)

Appendix 3 - About the Author

I was born and raised in California, but I've lived in Israel with my wife and our cats since 1995.

I served four years in the US Marines. After my honorable discharge I earned a BS in mathematics from the University of Nevada Las Vegas, an MS in statistics and an MBA from the University of California Davis.

I worked as a financial analyst for a real estate firm and then for the Maryland General Assembly.

After moving to Israel, I earned smicha from the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and Rav Zalman Nechemiah Goldberg.

I taught Gemara and Chumash for a number of years at a school for English-speakers in Jerusalem.

I'm now working as a teacher, writer, and editor.

One part of my teaching is the blog Thinking Torah.

Why Thinking Torah?

The blog is meant to stimulate thought and discussion about the Torah.

The great depth of our Torah is only accessible when we study it and ponder it. Reading the weekly parasha is a good first step, but it's not enough.

I'm sure you've noticed that we don't always live up to our ideals. If you can internalize the lessons of interpersonal relationships in the weekly parasha, then you can build an arsenal of hints that you can draw upon when facing some of life's challenges.

Please visit the blog at www.ThinkingTorah.com

You may contact me at this address: shlomo@ThinkingTorah.com

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