

“The Most Astounding Statement”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

What is the most astounding statement in Jewish literature?

Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, is reckoned the greatest of the biblical and Talmudic commentators. His commentary, written in 11th century France, runs next to the Bible and the Talmud in almost every standard Hebrew edition. Given the countless Bible commentaries, that Rashi’s commentaries became the touchstone attests to the remarkable quality of his mind and spirit.

The “astounding statement” referred to above is reported to us by Rashi’s grandson, Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam). Rashbam quotes his grandfather, saying that if he could, toward the end of his life, he would rewrite his entire commentary.

What an extraordinary statement! After completing the standard commentary of the ages, the wish to write a completely different one suggests the fertility of Rashi’s mind. Even more, it teaches the inexhaustibility of Torah. Having explained the Torah for every student for generations to come, Rashi now wants to explain it anew. At a time in life when all many wish to do is remember, Rashi is rethinking, weighing new possibilities. He invites us to remember that no comment is final, no interpretation above reexamination.

The grandeur and humility of that statement ring through the centuries. The student of Rashi knows that the master commentator does not hesitate to write, “I do not know how to explain this verse.” Even more extraordinary is his willingness, even in old age, to find a new path in Torah.