

Reference

The Rashi Descent ¹

Throughout the pre-Exilic period the Jews preserved records of their genealogical connection to the nation. This continuity was lost to a great extent due to the disruption of the Exile to Babylon and the Diaspora in Europe. Many families painstakingly preserved their traditions of descent even in the post-Exilic period. The scholarly family of the **Kalonymides** which believed in its Davidic descent, left Babylon about the 8th century, settled in Italy, and then moved to the Rhineland and France in the ninth and tenth centuries. From this family emanated the great Biblical and Talmudic commentator Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitskhak) (1040-1105). Rashi's family and disciples established centres of learning and laid the foundations of the communities which became the hub of Jewish life in many towns in Western Europe. Later, in the 14th century, their descendants moved to Eastern Europe. Thus a vast interrelated dynasty of rabbinic families spread across Europe, establishing a framework for genealogical research.



Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitskhak (1040-1105), France, best known medieval Jewish scholar and greatest commentator on the Torah and Talmud. Image courtesy of Chaim Freedman.

Are All Ashkenazi Jews Descended from Rashi?

Traditions of descent from famous rabbis and in particular from Rashi have long intrigued genealogists. The subject was discussed at length in several issues of *Avotaynu* some years ago. (F2) Aside from the genealogical sources of such traditions, an interesting mathematical aspect was presented. It was proposed that the theoretical number of ancestors any Ashkenazi Jew could have was greatly in excess of the Jewish population in Europe at the time of Rashi. Therefore all Ashkenazi Jews living today are descended not only from Rashi, but from all the Jews living in his time. Naturally most Jews cannot trace the exact lineage to Rashi.

Since most of the prominent rabbinical families are inter-related due to *Shidukhim* (matchmaking), and since there was a core of medieval rabbinical families who were descended from Rashi, the field of study required to establish specific descent today is very large. Some examples are **Epstein, Luria, Katzenellenbogen, Gunzburg, Jaffe, Heilprin, Landau, Lipshitz, Margolis, Rapaport, Shapira, Treves, Heller, Weil, Isserles, Shorr, Klausner, Horowitz, Katz, Teomim**, to name but a few. These families comprise the root from which most other rabbinical families stemmed. A specific family being researched may descend from a number of marital ties between rabbinical families, which ultimately connect back to **Katzenellenbogen, Luria**, etc., and through them to Rashi. A wide

familiarization with many rabbinical families may yield the link being sought, although it can be very much a case of looking for a needle in a haystack.

The late Paul Jacoby, a renowned Jerusalem genealogist, conducted considerable research into the above families. His valuable genealogical archive was presented to the **National Library at the Hebrew University**, Jerusalem.

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Footnote

1. Excerpted from: Freedman, Chaim. *Beit Rabbanan: Sources of Rabbinic Genealogy*. Petah Tikva, Israel: self-published, 2001. Used with permission. [\(return\)](#)

2. *Avotaynu: International Review of Jewish Genealogy*, Spring 1989, Spring 1990, Winter 1994, articles by Neil Rosenstein and Paul Jacobi. [\(return\)](#)

