

Video Clip: Rav Yitzchak Alfasi (RIF)

A North African Talmudist

"I support and trust the Rav (Alfasi) even if he says that right is left"
~ *Ra'avid, Abraham ben David, Halakhic commentator and Jewish mystic* ~

RIF is known as one of the greatest halakhists of all time. He is the intellectual grandfather of the Rambam. His main work is *Hilkhot Rav Alfasi*, later known as *Shas Katan* (mini-Talmud), as he dedicated his life to analyzing and extracting the essence of the Talmud and its applications to Jewish law. The RIF is also one of three main halakhists, along with Maimonides and the Rash (Asher ben Yehiel), upon which Rabbi Yosef Caro based his rulings in the *Shulhan Arukh*. Today his analyses are in the back of most print editions of the Talmud and studied as a Talmudic guide and resource in study halls across the Jewish religious and geographic spectrum.

Suggested Implementations

Talmud and Halakha

1. An introduction to the RIF addendum to the Talmud
2. An introduction to halakha and halakhic thought

Jewish History

1. An introduction to Jews in Arab lands
2. The transition from the Geonic period to the Rishonim period
3. A research project on lives and writings of prominent Rabbis
4. A unit on Jewish unity

Background

Yitzhak ben Yaakov Alfasi Hacoen was born in 1013 in Qal'at Hammad, a place historians connect to modern-day Algeria or to a village near Fes. Either way, his name (al-Fasi) indicates a heritage in Fes, Morocco. He studied in Qayrawan, Tunisia under Nissim ben Yaakov and Hananel ben Hushiel. That's where he was trained to set halakha from the Talmud. For ten years he sat in his father-in-law's attic to extract practical conclusions of the Talmud in a clear and decisive manner.

In a Jewish history context, it's important to note that the RIF lived at the crossroads of the Geonic and Rishonim periods. As such, he was comfortable arguing with the Geonic opinions despite the edict that Rabbis from later time periods should not argue with their predecessors' rulings. Maimonides would later write that Alfasi's work "has superseded all the geonic codes...for it contains all the decisions and laws which we need in our day..."

In 1045, the RIF moved to Fes with his wife and two children. Fes' Jewish community financially supported him and his family while he worked on his book of halakhot. Among his most famous students were Yehuda HaLevi, author of the *Kuzari* and many medieval poems, and Joseph ibn Migash, Maimon's teacher.

Alfasi's works are based on his belief that it is important to cater to the generation that was no longer acquainted intimately with Aramaic and could not necessarily derive their own halakhic rulings. However, there were quite a few who opposed his methods and his move away from Aramaic. Many Geonim were greatly opposed to this and felt that rather than allowing for the lowest common denominator, the rabbis should be working to raise Talmudic scholarship. The RIF, on the other hand, was convinced that although Talmudic scholarship is of utmost importance, there was a need to allow for greater accessibility to halakha, and thus he defied many Geonic writs and wrote his famous work.

"Dapei ha-RIF," as they are known, are Rabbi Alfasi's consolidation of the Talmud to sift out the halakha and practical applications. Although his sources include the Jerusalem Talmud, Geonic responsa, halakhic responsa and the Babylonian Talmud, his halakhic rulings are often based on the Babylonian Talmud. Already in the times of the Rishonim he was recognized as the great halakhist he is known today, as mentioned by Ra'avid, Nachmonides, Yitzchak Ba'al haTosfot, and Maimonides. Maimonides notes that during his time many were learning the RIF for halakha instead of the full Talmud. Many commentators began to circulate the writings of the RIF.

After 40 years in Fes, in 1088, at the age of 75, the RIF issued a financial ruling which negatively impacted a dangerous man. Two people who witnessed the ruling reported Alfasi to authorities on some unverified charges and he was forced to flee for his life with his family. The Alfasi family escaped to Al-Andalus, first to Cordoba and then to Lucena, where the RIF became head of the yeshiva in Lucena in 1089.

His love of Torah study and the Jewish people are expressed by two incidents:

1. Isaac Albalia was one of the RIF's main vocal objectors to his halakhic simplifying but recognized Rabbi Alfasi's brilliance and zealotry. So much so that Albalia requested the RIF adopt his son when he died, and the RIF obliged.
2. When Alfasi was on his deathbed he recommended Joseph ibn Migash as his successor and head of his yeshiva over his own son. The claim was that although his son may have been older and smart, Josef ibn Migash showed traits of practicality, "he is both smart and wise." For the RIF and his quest for contemporary halakha, that was key.

In addition to the "Dapei ha-RIF," Rabbi Alfasi wrote many halakhic rulings, *she'elot u'tshuvot*, in Hebrew and in Arabic, a large portion of which are still consulted today. Today his rewriting of the orders of Moed, Nashim, and Nezikin are learned around the world as an essential part of any Talmud study.

The RIF died on the 10th of Iyar 4863 (1103). He was memorialized in eulogies by Moshe ibn Ezra and Yehuda HaLevi. On his grave, his students engraved one of his quotes:

הרים ביום סיני לך רעשו כי מלאכי האל בך פגשו ויכתבו תורה בלוחות לברך וצבי כתריה לך חבשו. לא עצרו כח
נבונים לעמוד לולא תכונות ממך דרשו.

On the day of Sinai, mountains made noise for you because the messengers of G-d met you and wrote Torah on the tablets of your heart and crowned you with the antlers of a gazelle. The power of the wise cannot stand if not for the characteristics sought from you.

Questions for Discussion

1. He was said to be the intellectual grandfather of Maimonides, in what way do we see that?
2. He translated, summarized, and interpreted the Talmud for a generation who was no longer as familiar with Aramaic, and to open it up to be more accessible. Is there a benefit to keeping knowledge in the hands of the elite?
3. Almost all printed Talmuds today have the RIF in the back – how important is it to understand where he came from and the world in which he lived?

Suggested Readings

Weiss, I. H. "The Study of the Talmud in the Thirteenth Century." *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 1, no. 4, [University of Pennsylvania Press, Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania], 1889, pp. 289–313.

<https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1191-alfasi-isaac-ben-jacob>

<https://www.aish.com/jl/h/h/The-First-Pillar-of-Jewish-Law-The-Rif.html>

Special thanks to Professors Jane. S. Gerber and Reeva Spector Simon whose project was initiated by the generous funding of the Maurice Amado Foundation.