

# Discussion Guide for

## *Elvina's Mirror*, by Sylvie Weil

### WHY THIS STORY?

The idea for this novel came to me from reading Rashi's commentary to the Bible. Rashi (1040-1105) is considered to this day by Jewish scholars as the "Great Commentator." When you read the Bible in Hebrew (the original language of the Old Testament) you always have Rashi's commentary written in small characters at the bottom of the page.

Rashi's commentary answers all kinds of questions the reader of the Bible might ask. It explains the Law, it tells stories, it is full of old French words and details about life in medieval France, and has many cozy explanations, the sort that a nice grandfather would give his grandchildren.

Reading this commentary, I started wondering what Rashi looked like, what kind of hat he wore, and whether he had to wear distinctive clothes that showed he was a Jew. In Alsace and Germany, for example, Jews were forced to wear pointy hats and a yellow circle pinned to their chests, but this came after Rashi's time. Rashi and his family, I learned, dressed just like their Christian neighbors.

The name Rashi is an acronym (a word created from initials of other words) which stood for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, which means Solomon ben Isaac—or Solomon, son of Isaac. Rashi lived in Troyes, France, in the heart of the Champagne region. He ran a school, or Yeshiva, and he was the leader of the Jewish community in the whole region. He had three daughters and four grandsons who, following in their grandfather's footsteps, became famous leaders and teachers of Jewish tradition and law. We know that Rashi had at least one granddaughter, named Elvina—about whom I decided to write this novel.

### THE WORLD IN THE 11<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

Naturally, I had to find out everything I could about life in Troyes in Elvina's time. How did people dress? What did their houses look like? What kind of medicine did they practice? What did they eat? What kind of fruit and vegetables did they grow? Elvina and her family never laid eyes on a tomato, or an eggplant, or a potato, or corn, or bananas or oranges or pineapples. They did not use forks, only knives and spoons, and they usually just scooped up their food with slices of bread, or with their fingers.

I spent a lot of time imagining what life might be like in those days! I was helped by memories of my own childhood holidays in a small French village, where we had no plumbing, only outhouses, where water came from wells and my grandmother cooked on a woodstove.

*Elvina's Mirror* is set in 1097, the year following the First Crusade, an important historical event that affected the lives of many people in Europe. The Crusade was mainly directed against Muslims, but was also a very frightening time for Jews. It foreshadowed what they were to endure centuries later, first during the Spanish Inquisition, then during the Holocaust.

Many events in the book are faithful adaptations of real historical events, recorded in archives. For example, the story of the horseman who accused a Jew of casting a spell on his horse when the horse had in fact been frightened by a snake is an incident that really happened in Rashi's time.

## GEOGRAPHY

**Where is Troyes? Find it on a map.**

**Where is Champagne? Does the word Champagne sound familiar to you?** Champagne has always produced wine, but the bubbles were put in several centuries after Elvina's time. Elvina's family produced wine, but not the kind with bubbles.

## HISTORY

During the winter of 1095 and the spring of 1096, tens of thousands of Crusaders swept through Europe on their way to the Holy Land. The Pope had called on them to go to Jerusalem to reclaim the tomb of Jesus. This was the first of several Crusades. Many Crusaders were rich and noble, but many more were extremely poor and stole everything they could get their hands on as they traveled. They stole food, sheep, chickens, donkeys, horses. In some towns, they killed Jews by the hundreds and even thousands, when they refused to be baptized and become Christian.

Between 1095 and 1291 there were eight Crusades. **Go to the library or do an internet search to find out everything you can about the different Crusades.**

## MEDIEVAL LIFESTYLES AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Rashi's family did not live in a neighborhood that was particularly marked off as "Jewish." The community was small, and Rashi was on friendly terms with his Christian neighbors, who were modest townspeople: craftsmen, farmers, merchants.

In the Middle Ages and up to the French Revolution (1789), social classes or ranks were very strictly defined, and there were few opportunities for socializing between people of different ranks. There was the nobility, there was the clergy, and there was everybody else: merchants, peasants, workers, servants.

Gauthier is a young knight; he belongs to the nobility. He met Elvina under special circumstances. But under normal circumstances a young nobleman would never meet Elvina, the daughter of a Jewish teacher, let alone speak to her.

## SCHOOL

**Describe the classroom scenes in the book. Are they very different from your experiences in a classroom? How do the students learn? Obadiah, aged twenty and one of Solomon ben Isaac's best students, is also a full-time teacher for the younger boys. What do you think of him as a teacher?**

## THE MAZAL

*Mazal* is a Hebrew word which means constellation, or star. Rashi, in his commentary on the Talmud (the traditional body of Jewish Law), explains that the *mazal* is a celestial guide that watches over us and speaks up for us in heaven.

Elvina speaks and writes imagined letters to her *mazal*. The *mazal* is not just an imaginary friend, but is truly a Guardian Angel, and speaking to her is an expression of faith. Faith plays a great part in the lives of all the characters.

You may know the expression *Mazal Tov* which means "good luck." It comes from the same word, *mazal*.

## DIFFICULT CHOICES

Elvina has to make difficult choices. Sometimes she just reacts on instinct. Because she can't stand how cruel the women are to Columba, she becomes her protector, and stands up against the whole community.

*Can you see yourself standing up for someone who is persecuted?*

*How would you feel if the people in your neighborhood were so angry at you they stopped talking to you, or even insulted you? How does Elvina deal with it?*

Later on in the book, Elvina tries to help Ephraim, even though he is potentially dangerous. She puts herself at risk in order to protect him from the anger and fear of the Jewish community.

*Do you think Elvina is brave or just foolhardy?*

## MEDIEVAL MEDICINE AND MAGIC

*Medieval women knew a lot about herbs and medicinal plants. Can you find examples of different medical treatments practiced by Elvina?*

*Elvina visits the apothecary several times. What do you think of the remedies he suggests? Make a list of them. Do you find them strange? Do you think they worked?*

*What do you think of Columba's recipes for restoring Ephraim's memory and desire to study? Medicine and magic were closely related in those times!*

*Do you think we still sometimes confuse medicine with magic? Can you find any examples? Have you ever tried to do magic to "fix" a situation?*

## MIRRORS

Mirrors play an important part in this book. A mirror was a very precious thing, and some women never had mirrors. Imagine a life without mirrors. If you really wanted to see what you looked like, you might have to look at your reflection in a river, a pond, or even a puddle. At best, your family might own a silver dish. **Practice living without a mirror for a day or two!**

*How does Elvina hope to cure Ephraim with her "mirror of the future?" Her grandfather tells her it was a good idea but Ephraim is not ready for it. What do you think he means?*

## BOOKS AT THE TIME OF RASHI

*Why is it so upsetting to Solomon ben Isaac that the margins have been cut from the book in the synagogue?*

Elvina and her family lived several hundred years before printing presses were invented. If you wanted to own a book, it had to be copied by hand. Copying books was a profession; scribes and monks spent their whole lives copying sacred texts, like the Bible, on parchment (the skin of a sheep or goat prepared for writing on), using goose quills and ink. The parchment pages were then assembled to form books. Parchment and ink were very expensive.

The Jewish Bible, sometimes referred to as the Old Testament, was originally written in Hebrew, the language of the Jewish people. It was translated into Greek, then into Latin by the Christians. It was often copied on scrolls, but there were also books, much like our books, except that the pages were parchment, and the covers were often made of wood. The pages and the covers were bound together with strings.

*Do you like to own books? List the ways you, personally, get the books you want to read.*

## FAMILY LIFE, AND BEING A GIRL

In medieval families, roles were strictly defined according to gender. Elvina would love to study like her brother Yom Tov and her cousin Samuel, but she can't.

***How would you feel if you were told you couldn't go to school?***

***Who supports Elvina in her efforts to develop her mind and increase her knowledge? Do you have a friend, family member, or teacher who encourages you to pursue your education?***

***Elvina has an easier relation with her grandfather, Solomon ben Isaac than with her own father, Judah ben Nathan. Can you explain why? How are the grandfather and granddaughter alike?***

## RELATIONS BETWEEN JEWS AND CHRISTIANS

Relations between Jews and Christians could be friendly, but Jews had to be very cautious. Distrust or even hate could flare up at any time. Jews could be accused of sorcery, or of burning churches, or of just about anything.

**Find examples in the book.**

***How would you describe Elvina's relations with her Christian friends? Have you ever experienced similar situations (with friends coming from different backgrounds, for example)?***

## ELVINA'S CHARACTER

Elvina is not a simple girl. Though devoted to her family, and not at all rebellious by modern standards, she has a mind of her own and makes her own decisions. She is much more daring than any of her friends, and she is very compassionate.

***How do the events described in the novel change Elvina? What lessons does she learn? How does her relationship with Obadiah develop? Do you think they have a "special feeling" for each other? How is this feeling expressed? What about her friendship with Gauthier?***

## SUSPENSE

***What is suspense? Talk about the suspense in the story. What was the scariest part of the book?***

***Are there questions you feel remain unanswered at the end of the book; like who stole the margins (that's pretty obvious)? Can you guess who killed the cat and the goose? Why do you think the author decided not to answer that question? Do you agree with this decision?***

## STYLE

Some chapters are written in the third person (he, she, they) and some in the first person (I). Some events in the book are told twice, in different ways. The chapters in which Elvina confides in her *mazal* are written in the first person, so the reader feels closer to Elvina. It is a little as if she kept a diary.

***Do you keep a diary? Have you ever tried writing a story using different points of view? Try writing a story in first person. Then rewrite it in third person. What is different? Discuss how the point of view changes the story you are telling.***

## LANGUAGE

Language is alive and changes along with our culture. When you write a story taking place in the eleventh century, you have to adapt your language to that particular time. You can't have people say "Wait a minute!" or "In a few seconds" because those notions did not exist. You can't write that somebody was "stressed out" because this phrase belongs to the modern world. You can't use modern lingo.

***Read an article in a magazine and pick out language that would not have existed in medieval times.***

***Write a short story taking place in the Middle Ages, being careful not to use words referring to modern notions. How difficult was this to do? How well did you succeed?***