On the Difficulties in Identifying Lexical Innovations of Medieval Writers:
Rashi as a Test Case
Ariel Shaveh

This lecture aims to point out and demonstrate some methodological difficulties in the research of the lexicon of medieval Hebrew. The discussion will focus on Rashi's Commentary on the Pentateuch – a composition widely and immediately disseminated and therefore possessing challenging textual features, but the principles sketched may be of concern also to the research of other contemporary compositions.

Rashi (R. Shlomo Yits'ḥaki, 1040–1105) is the best known and most admired medieval European Jewish commentator. His oeuvre includes numerous lexical innovations, which attracted the attention of several scholars in the past. However, limited access to reliable manuscripts of Rashi's work, along with the lack of a comprehensive database of preceding compositions, caused many new language forms to slip away from previous descriptions of Rashi's language, while some other innovations were falsely attributed to him. Nowadays, due to the progress of research and the completion of the ancient literature database of the Historical Dictionary Project, it is time to reexamine Rashi's contribution to the Hebrew lexicon, and, moreover, the actual pretension to accurately outline its extent.