

Rashi's Stance of Incorporealism: A Critique of Rabbi Slifkin's Response

By: Saul Zucker

In his recent article *Rashi's Stance on Corporealism: A Response to Rabbi Zucker*,¹ Rabbi Natan Slifkin presents a comprehensive response to my refutation of his position that it is likely that Rashi was a corporealist. He first challenges the four areas of evidence that I presented to demonstrate that Rashi was not a corporealist, and then responds to my refutation of the four premises behind his original argument. In the postscript to my article in *Hakirah*,² I stressed the importance of utilizing a rigorous methodology in analyzing any claims and evidence in this area – a methodology involving the research of all sources in the original and in context, and the separation of assumption and speculation from careful logical analysis in understanding those sources and using them to arrive at conclusions. In this article, I shall utilize that same methodology to examine Slifkin's response, point by point, in order to assess the validity of his argument and claim. For the sake of clarity and convenience, I will use as headers the page numbers and subject areas of Slifkin's response in his article, and I will present a brief summary at the end, providing an overview of the entire discussion.

PAGE 46 – The Context of the *Pesukim* in *Yeshayahu* Regarding *Bnei Yisrael's* Testimony

Before challenging my evidence from the *pesukim* in *Yeshayahu* by attacking the argument itself, Slifkin challenged the evidence based upon its location, claiming that “Surely the place where we would expect a discussion of incorporealism to be is the place where every incorporealist Rishon discussed it...[i.e., the *pasuk* of *lo re'isem kol temunah*].”³ This claim, however, is based on a fallacy.⁴ Rashi is not introducing “a discussion [of incorporealism];” he is explaining phrases of the Torah *she-bikhsav* by providing a “short” commentary on each phrase in its own locus. The other *rishonim* to whom Slifkin alludes did indeed introduce discussions about incorporealism, using the *pasuk* of *lo re'isem kol temunah* as a proof text; however, for Rashi the relevant consideration as to what to say and where to say it is the specific need of each *pasuk's* explanation on its own terms. As an incorporealist who raises the issue of

¹ *Hakirah, The Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought*, volume 9, winter 2010, pp. 45-79.

² P. 43.

³ Slifkin (2010), p. 46.

⁴ Note that my refutation of Slifkin's challenge here addresses the specific issue that he raised, i.e., the **location** of the evidence. My refutation of his challenge to my argument itself is presented below.

anthropomorphisms only when necessary,⁵ Rashi would have no need to comment especially on the *pasuk* of *lo re'isem kol temunah* itself; its meaning is what it appears to be – the doctrine of incorporeality.⁶ However, when it comes to the issue of testimony in *Yeshayahu*, an issue that requires explanation, Rashi introduces⁷ the *pasuk* of *lo re'isem kol temunah*, as an expression of the doctrine of incorporeality,⁸ in order to explain the meaning of the testimony.

Slifkin further claims that the context of the *pesukim* in *Yeshayahu* is not the issue of (in)corporeality, but rather the issue of God's exclusivity. This claim, as well, is based on a fallacy, since Rashi does indeed – explicitly – tie the concept of *lo re'isem kol temunah* with the issue of the testimony about God's exclusivity, in his commentary to *Yeshayahu* 43:12. Thus, if it can be demonstrated that Rashi views the *pasuk* of *lo re'isem kol temunah* as referring to incorporeality,⁹ then it is a fact that the issue of *lo re'isem kol temunah*, God's incorporeality, is indeed tied to the issue of God's exclusivity,¹⁰ and to claim that the two issues are irrelevant to each other is therefore fallacious.

In response to my having pointed out that Ramban cited the verse from *Yeshayahu* concerning *bnei Yisrael's* testimony as one of his proof texts for the doctrine of incorporeality,¹¹ Slifkin noted that “Ramban is in fact citing the verse in support of a different claim, that God is not limited by anything.”¹² I must confess to being at a loss as to Slifkin's claim here; the entire problem with corporealism as presented by sages such as R. Sa'adyah Gaon, R. Bachya ibn Pakuda, and Rambam is that corporealism means that God is limited. Separating the issue of corporealism from the issue of God's being limited, as Slifkin does, is incomprehensible.

PAGES 47-51 – The Evidence From Rashi's Comments on the Opening of the Heavens

Turning to my argument itself regarding Rashi's comments on the opening of the heavens, Slifkin points out that I “had to concede that [I have] no idea what this testimony [of

⁵ See my article, pp. 20-21.

⁶ A corporealist, on the other hand, would indeed need to comment on this *pasuk*, explaining how it does not contravene the concept of corporealism.

⁷ Rashi on *Yeshayahu* 43:12.

⁸ See footnote 4 above.

⁹ As I have demonstrated in my article, pp. 33-35.

¹⁰ As to the concept behind this fact, i.e., **how** the two issues are related, see my article, pp. 33-35.

¹¹ C. Chavel, ed., *Kisvei Ramban* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook 1963), volume I, p. 347.

¹² Slifkin (2010), p. 46.

bnei Yisrael] means or how it works.”¹³ This is a gross misrepresentation of my position. I had merely stated in response to Slifkin’s claim,¹⁴ that “knowing the **specific method by which *bnei Yisrael* were shown all of the heavens** is completely irrelevant to the argument; in whatever way God showed *bnei Yisrael* the heavens, that was sufficient for the purpose that God intended for it.”¹⁵ With regard to the testimony itself, however, I clearly explained “what it means and how it works.”¹⁶

Slifkin’s challenge to my evidence regarding the opening of the heavens lies in his claim that “God was not considered to inhabit [the] seven firmaments, but rather was thought to be above them...the goal of these verses [of the testimony] is to negate the existence of the deities that other people were worshipping, whose existence was only conceived of in the seven firmaments...Only someone with a corporeal view of God would work with the assumption that other deities would likewise be corporeal.”¹⁷ Furthermore, if Rashi understood the firmaments to be physical structures, then the implication of God being above the firmament is that he is *spatially* above them...[and] since [Rashi] interprets ‘in front’ and ‘behind’ [in the mishnah in *Chagigah* 11b] as spatial regions, it seems clear that he likewise interprets ‘above’ and ‘below’ as spatial regions...”¹⁸

The thrust of this claim, that Rashi viewed God as being above the firmaments spatially, cannot possibly lie in the fact that Rashi speaks of Hashem as sitting above the seven firmaments, since R. El’azar Roke’ach, an unequivocal incorporealist,¹⁹ wrote numerous times of “Hashem sitting above the seven firmaments,”²⁰ and he did not devote a single word “to an intricate solution as to how the description of God being on top of the firmaments does not mean

¹³ Slifkin (2010), p. 47.

¹⁴ His claim was that “unless we know the **method by which *bnei Yisrael* saw** what they did in the heavens, nothing can be proven from the testimony issue.” See my article, p. 35.

¹⁵ See my article, p. 35.

¹⁶ In my article, p. 34.

¹⁷ This statement has no basis whatsoever. If it were true, then there would be no room for incorporealism at all, since the Torah itself speaks of not worshipping other deities, those deities being corporeal idols, celestial spheres, etc.

¹⁸ Slifkin(2010), pp. 47-48, 50-51.

¹⁹ Cited by Ramban in his letter to the rabbis of France as an example of a French sage incorporealist. See *Kisvei Ramban*, volume I, p. 346.

²⁰ See, for example, his Commentary on the *Siddur*, section 37, p. 230.

that he is spatially above them.”²¹ Thus, Slifkin must resort to concluding that Rashi views God’s sitting above the firmaments as a spatial issue since Rashi in his commentary to *Chagigah* 11b “interprets ‘in front’ and ‘behind’ as spatial regions, it seems clear that he likewise interprets ‘above’ and ‘below’ as spatial regions...Thus, Rashi’s interpretation of ‘above’ as meaning ‘above the firmament’ and ‘below’ as ‘below the earth’ refers to spatial regions. We therefore have a clear piece of evidence that Rashi is of the view that God is spatially above the firmament – and thus corporeal.”²² Slifkin’s claim here is that words used in the same sentence are used in the same framework. If, for example, “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” is allegorical, then “a foot for a foot” is obviously also allegorical; one would not need a separate teaching for the latter.²³

There is no doubt that in this example, phrases used in the same sentence are indeed used in the same framework. However, let us look at another example. Rava taught²⁴ that one is required to say *birkos haTorah* for “*mikra, midrash, mishnah, and Talmud.*” While there is no question that a person who reads from *Tanakh* – and has no idea what any of the words mean – does say the *birkos haTorah*, one who reads from the Talmud – and has no idea what any of the words mean – does not say *birkos haTorah*. The reason for this is that the words of *Torah she-bikhsav* have sanctity and status in and of themselves, and the words of *Torah she-be-al peh* have status only through the learner’s understanding. Now, one could have attempted to make the case that the words of *Torah she-be-al peh* should also have status in and of themselves since *midrash, mishnah, and Talmud* are listed in the same sentence as *mikra*, but that conclusion would be factually incorrect. What is the difference between the example of “an eye for an eye” and the example of *birkos haTorah*? In the case of an “eye for an eye” the list (eye, tooth, hand, and foot) are all examples of one principle, and there is no indication from any other source that “eye” and “foot” belong to different frameworks with regard to the issue of payment. And in fact, the very same laws, in all of their details, that apply to “eye” apply to “foot.” However, while *mikra, midrash, mishnah, and Talmud* are all part of “Torah” and therefore require

²¹ Slifkin had claimed in his article (2010), p. 50, that if Rashi were an incorporealist we would expect him to explain how God’s sitting above the firmaments should not be understood as literal. Yet R. El’azar Roke’ach, clearly an incorporealist, also does not provide the explanation that Slifkin says we would expect to find.

²² Slifkin (2010), p. 51.

²³ This formulation of Slifkin’s view was presented by someone logged on to the *Hirhurim* website as “Another Guest” in the comments section on Rabbi Gil Student’s review of the *Hakirah* articles, February 13, 2010, 7:51 pm.

²⁴ *Berakhos* 11b.

berakhos, there are indeed indications from other sources, regarding the “Torah status” of each area, that they do not all exist in the same framework, and therefore, while one must indeed say the *berakhos* for all of them, there are differences between them due to their different frameworks.

Having said this, let us see whether “in front and behind” and “above and below” in Rashi’s view are akin to “an eye for an eye” or whether they are akin to *birkos haTorah*. While they all have something in common insofar as they are listed in one sentence in *Hagigah* 11b – the commonality being that they are esoteric principles that may not be taught to the masses – there are indeed indications from external sources that each one exists in its own framework. Rashi defines the issue of “above and below” as referring to *Ma’aseh Merkavah* and the issue of “in front and behind” as referring to *Ma’aseh Bereishis*.²⁵ The two terms *Ma’aseh Bereishis* and *Ma’aseh Merkavah*, throughout the writings of the Sages, refer to two different frameworks altogether,²⁶ and thus, they are akin to *birkos haTorah*, and not to “an eye for an eye.” To assume that both *Ma’aseh Merkavah* and *Ma’aseh Bereishis* exist in a spatial framework because they are used in the same sentence is therefore an assumption without basis whatsoever.

With this, Slifkin’s argument is shown to be fallacious, and ultimately what is left in his article as a response to my proof from Rashi’s comments in *Yeshayahu* is that “the goal of these verses is to negate the existence of the deities that other people were worshipping [at the time], whose existence was only conceived of in the seven firmaments.”²⁷ My article in *Hakirah* has already demonstrated why this claim cannot be true,²⁸ and Slifkin did not address this argument of mine at all in his response.

Parenthetically, Slifkin mentions that there is evidence for corporealism from the *Pesikta Rabbasi* which states that at Sinai, God opened the seven firmaments and was revealed to the

²⁵ See Rashi on *Koheles* 7:23-24 and *Mishlei* 25:27.

²⁶ In fact, the original source of this entire discussion, *Chagigah* 11b, states that one may not teach *Ma’aseh Bereishis* to two students, and one may not teach *Ma’aseh Merkavah* even to one student. In addition, in his commentary on *Yechezkel* 8:2, where the verse speaks of the issue that Rashi labeled as “above and below,” Rashi states that one is prohibited from even contemplating the issue, while he never states anything like that with regard to the issue of “in front and behind.” Clearly, they are two very different issues. And if *Ma’aseh Bereishis* (“in front and behind”) is a framework different from *Ma’aseh Merkavah* (“above and below”), then Slifkin’s argument (words used in the same sentence are used in the same framework) is completely negated in this case.

²⁷ Slifkin (2010), pp. 47-48.

²⁸ Zucker, pp. 36-37.

Israelites “‘*ayin be-‘ayin*” in all His glory. Slifkin states, “of course, some will insist that such description must be metaphorical, and will engage in intellectual gymnastics in order to devise such interpretations, but how much more explicit can a corporealist be?”²⁹ Interestingly, Rabbeinu Bachya, in his commentary on *Shemos* 40:38 employs similar imagery regarding the Israelites at Sinai, and in the future, seeing God “‘*ayin be-‘ayin*” and it is clear that he must have meant it metaphorically – without any “intellectual gymnastics” on his part – since Rabbeinu Bachya was a known incorporealist. The reason for the lack of any intellectual gymnastics is that the Torah itself in *Bemidbar* 14:14 speaks of the Israelites “seeing” God at Sinai “‘*ayin be-‘ayin*.” This verse was clearly the source for the *Pesikta Rabbasi* as well as for Rabbeinu Bachya. Slifkin did not have to ask “how much more explicit can a corporealist be?” about the *Pesikta Rabbasi*; he could have asked the same question about God, the Author of *Bemidbar* 14:14, and be done with the whole issue.³⁰

PAGES 51-55 – The Evidence From Rashi’s Comments on God’s “Right and Left”

In my article,³¹ I cited Rashi’s commentary on *Bereishis* 1:26, “Is there such as thing as ‘right’ and ‘left’ with regard to God?” as a proof for Rashi’s incorporealism. Slifkin responded by stating that Rashi here does not mean to say, “Is there such a thing as ‘right’ and ‘left’ with regard to God? Surely there is not...” Rather, he means to say, “Is there such a thing as ‘right’

²⁹ Slifkin (2010), p. 50.

³⁰ In a footnote that Slifkin wrote relevant to the subject matter of this section (Slifkin (2010), p. 66, footnote 44), he challenges my claim that Rashi saw the early Hebrew complete paraphrasing of R. Sa’adyah Gaon’s *Emunos VeDe’os*. His challenge is based on the fact that “the idea from R. Saadiah that Rashi quotes is found not only in *Emunos V’Deyos*, but also in *Sefer HaGaluy*, as well as in R. Saadiah’s commentary on *Bereishis* and his commentary on *Daniel*. Furthermore, Rashi there writes that he saw the idea ‘quoted in the name of Saadiah Gaon,’ which implies that he did not see Saadiah Gaon’s own work.” This challenge is incorrect, and, in fact, it helps to strengthen my claim. First, R. Sa’adyah explained the *pasuk* from *Daniel* in four places, but he used different phrasing and details in each of the four places. Rashi’s citation of R. Sa’adyah’s explanation is closest to the latter’s formulation in *Emunos VeDe’os* than those of the other three places. Furthermore, Rashi quotes R. Sa’adyah Gaon six times throughout his (Rashi’s) commentaries (on *Shemos* 24:12, *Zekharyah* 6:6, *Tehillim* 45:10, *Daniel* 7:25, 8:14, and *Rosh HaShannah* 20b). In five of the six instances, Rashi cites the name of the book of R. Sa’adyah from which he is quoting (and in one case – that of *Zekharyah* – the book was R. Sa’adyah’s Commentary on *Daniel*, which Rashi saw directly). However, in the quote that I had cited, Rashi says that he “saw [an explanation of the *pasuk* from *Daniel*] written in the name of R. Sa’adyah” – not from R. Sa’adyah’s own commentary on *Daniel*, to which Rashi had direct access. The early Hebrew paraphrasing of *Emunos VeDe’os* was a work “written in the name of R. Sa’adyah.” In fact, Professor Robert Chazan has already written about Rashi’s having seen the early Hebrew paraphrasing of *Emunos VeDe’os*. See Chazan’s article, “Rashi’s Commentary on the Book of *Daniel*” in G. Dahan, G. Nahon, E. Nicolas eds., *Rashi et la Culture Juive en France du Nord au Moyen Age* (Paris: E. Peeters 1997), pp. 111-121.

³¹ Zucker, pp. 21-33, 38.

and ‘left’ with regard to God? Surely there is only right, but not left...”³² On his website, he claimed that this is how the editors of the Sapirstein edition of Rashi understood Rashi as well,³³ a claim, that after contacting the editors directly, Slifkin was forced to retract.³⁴ He had admitted in advance of contacting the Sapirstein editors that if they did indeed view the issue in accordance with what I had argued in my article, that this would be a support for my view.³⁵

Slifkin further argued that perhaps Rashi means to say, “Is there such a thing as ‘right’ and ‘left’ with regard to God? Surely there is not – not because God is incorporeal, but rather – because God is “far, far larger than His creations, who are like toys before Him.” I must confess to not understanding this argument at all. A corporeal being, no matter how large, that does not occupy all of physical space entirely, still has a “right” and a “left” such that miniscule beings, even those who are like toys, can still be on its “right” and on its “left.”

Slifkin’s third approach in his response is to claim that there is a version of Rashi on *Bereishis* that omits the term “right” from the commentary, thus yielding support for Slifkin’s interpretation. That version is not contained in any cited manuscript; rather, it is contained in the Bomberg edition of the Torah.³⁶ The Bomberg edition is notorious for being “greatly inferior,” as Slifkin himself notes,³⁷ and citing it as a support, especially when its textual version is contrary to that of numerous manuscripts that are not “greatly inferior,” is indeed curious. Further, Slifkin notes that he consulted with “manuscript experts” regarding the accuracy of the Rashi quote in the Bomberg edition. Slifkin does not state who these experts are. Quite by happenstance, I was informed that the expert who told Slifkin that in his opinion the Bomberg

³² Slifkin (2010), p.53.

³³ See www.rationalistjudaism.com, November 2009, “One Man’s Maverick is Another Man’s Bore” comments of November 17, 2009, 8:14 pm.

³⁴ Ibid, November 19, 2009, 7:19 pm.

³⁵ Ibid, November 18, 2009, 11:47 pm. This discussion on Slifkin’s website was with a reader logged on as “YU Talmid.”

³⁶ See Slifkin (2010), pp. 53-54.

³⁷ P. 53. See “*Mikraot Gedolot HaKeter – Biblica Rabbinica*” by Yaakov Aaronson, which speaks of at least “hundreds of errors” in the Bomberg edition. The article is available at www.jewishlibraries.org/ajlweb/publications/proceedings/proceedings2004/aronson.pdf.

edition is incorrect here is Professor Jordan Penkower, a leading expert in biblical texts and manuscripts. Why did Slifkin not identify him, as would be expected in a scholarly article?³⁸

Finally, it should be noted that at the end of this section of his article, Slifkin admits that Rashi's commentary about God's "right" and "left" could indeed be a statement about God being incorporeal. (But, he claims, that even if this is true, "it must be taken in the context of Rashi's entire corpus...against all that other evidence.")³⁹

PAGES 55-56 – The Evidence From Rashi's Comments on God Walking

In my *Hakirah* article,⁴⁰ I cited Rashi's commentary on *Sotah* 42b, where Rashi asked, "And what is this 'walking' which implies that He literally walks?" as a proof of Rashi's incorporealism. Rashi's question is a rhetorical one, as is clear from his entire comment, "And what is this promise that he promised [the soldiers] that 'God your Lord – He walks with you,' rather than [merely] saying that 'God your Lord is with you'? And what is this 'walking,' which implies that He literally walks?" This type of rhetorical question is not a *she'ailah* – an inquisitive question that searches for information; it is a *kushya* – an "attack" question that raises a problem. Now, what is the problem with the *pasuk* stating that God literally walks? In an attempt to address this point, Slifkin suggests that the problem "may be because God was conceived of as being very large and therefore could not walk amongst the people."⁴¹ Note that neither Rashi nor the Torah spoke about God walking "amongst" the people; rather they spoke of God walking "with" the people. A very large being can walk "with" the people just as he can fight as a warrior for them.⁴² Further, if Slifkin means here that God is so large as not to be able to walk on earth, His being too great in size for that altogether, then he would be contradicting what he wrote in his original article, that according to Rashi, God's literal hand covered Moshe to protect him at Sinai, and God literally passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt to save them. Apparently, according to Slifkin's understanding of Rashi, God is small enough to

³⁸ I thought perhaps that the reason for the lack of citation might be that Professor Penkower had requested anonymity. However, a mutual friend contacted Professor Penkower and was told that the latter had no recollection of making such a request.

³⁹ Slifkin (2010), p. 55.

⁴⁰ Zucker, pp. 38-39.

⁴¹ Slifkin (2010), p. 56, footnote 16.

⁴² I refer here to *Shemos* 15:3, where God appeared as a warrior, and corporealists, presumably, take this literally.

accomplish those tasks, so how is He too large to accomplish the task of walking with the people during war?

Slifkin criticized my insertion of the phrase “[therefore the Talmud teaches]...”, claiming that this bracketed phrase in the translation is incorrect.⁴³ But let us examine the passage in *Sotah* 42b and the comments of Rashi upon it. The Talmud had asked a question, “*VeKhol Kakh Lamah?*” which Rashi explained as meaning “what is this promise... and what is this ‘walking’...?” The Talmud **answers that question** by stating that “the Name of God and all references to Him are contained in the Ark,” which Rashi explained in his comment (immediately following his comment on the Talmud’s question) as meaning, “the Ark goes out with them to war.” How does this answer address the questions that Rashi had raised? The Talmud’s rhetorical question was “how could the Torah suggest that God literally walks, when we know that He is incorporeal?” to which the Talmud responds, “He is not walking; it is His Name in the Ark which is walking.” The bracketed insert is simply the connection between the Talmud’s question and its answer in Rashi’s successive comments. That is not something that I imposed onto Rashi; it is contained in the flow of the passage itself which Rashi is explaining.

PAGES 56-61 – The Evidence From the Perception of Rashi Amongst the *Rishonim*

Slifkin starts this section of his response by stating that “Zucker considers that anti-corporealists must consider corporealists to be proposing the antithesis (!) of Judaism...”⁴⁴ as if I had conjured that idea on my own or that it is confined only to Rambam. Let us see. Ramban, in his letter to the French rabbis, had stated that anyone who accepts corporealism is “following nonsense (*hevel*),”⁴⁵ “is as if he has no God at all,”⁴⁶ “is accursed,” and “will suffer the fires of Hell,”⁴⁷ and that incorporealism is “the *emunah* upon which our nation was founded,”⁴⁸ “is the *emunah* of our holy patriarchs,”⁴⁹ and “is a fundamental of our *emunah*.”⁵⁰ Ra’avad, as quoted in *Sefer Ha’Ikkarim* 1:2, states, “The essential principle of Torah *emunah* is incorporeality.” I

⁴³ Slifkin (2010), p. 56.

⁴⁴ Slifkin (2010), p. 56.

⁴⁵ C. Chavel, ed., *Kisvei Ramban* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook 1963), volume I, p. 345.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 346.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 347.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 346.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 347.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 348.

therefore do not understand the meaning of the exclamation point contained in parentheses that Slifkin wrote as it would apply to me but not, for example, to Ramban and Ra'avad.

I had claimed in my article that there are strongly incorporealistic *rishonim* who cite Rashi favorably and extensively throughout their works, and that this would not be possible had they viewed Rashi as a proponent of corporealism.⁵¹ Slifkin objects, by stating that "...Ra'avad opposed corporealism, yet he writes that some of the corporealists were greater and better people than Rambam. Ramban, writing to the French rabbis that he presumed to be corporealists, addressing them with great respect even as he rebukes them; he also praises R. Moshe Taku, a prominent corporealist, as being a great *chacham*. Rabbi Avraham b. Azriel, while opposed to the corporealist interpretations of R. Moshe Taku, nevertheless refers to him as a *tzaddik*."⁵² Does this indeed refute my claim? Let us remember that Ra'avad, who spoke of some unnamed corporealists as "better and greater" than Rambam is the same Ra'avad who said numerous times in his glosses about Rambam, "that which he wrote here is entirely nonsense / meaningless...",⁵³ so that the former comment should be understood within the context of the latter comments. At the same time, throughout all of Ra'avad's works, which include various Talmudic and *midrashic* commentaries, *halakhic* treatises, responsa, and the aforementioned glosses, he never cites any corporealist favorably once, let alone extensively.

Ramban does indeed address the French rabbis with respect; he is concerned that they may be making a serious mistake in their ideology, and he sets out to correct them. This pedagogic endeavor requires a cordial relationship, one of care, concern, and respect on the part of the pedagogue.⁵⁴ At the same time, he refers to those who adopt an ideology of corporealism as "accursed," "as if he has no God at all," etc., as cited above. Ramban is not equivocal at all as to his view of corporealism and corporealists. It is true that he refers to R. Moshe Taku as a "wise man" – Ramban cites R. Moshe Taku once, in the former's commentary to *Gittin* 7b, and the work cited by Ramban for which he labels R. Taku as a wise man is one of the latter's *halakhic* treatises. Ramban never mentions R. Moshe Taku's *Kesav Tamim*, the work which

⁵¹ Zucker, pp. 39-40.

⁵² Slifkin (2010), p. 57.

⁵³ See for example, Ra'avad's glosses on *Hilkhos Berakhos* 8:11, *Hilkhos Shabbos* 12:1, *Hilkhos Ishus* 23:2, *Hilkhos Shemitah* 4:6, *Hilkhos Beis HaBechirah* 4:5, *Hilkhos Temidin* 4:13, and *Hilkhos Tum'as Meis* 25:3.

⁵⁴ In fact, Ramban follows his own advice here. He advises the French rabbis when dealing with the masses who have mistaken notions, "It is also fitting for you (the rabbis) to warn everyone in a pleasant tone..." (See Ramban's letter, p. 349).

contains R. Moshe Taku's notion of corporealism, and there is no evidence that Ramban ever saw it or knew about it. And again, aside from the just-mentioned case, throughout the extensive corpus of Ramban's works, he never cites corporealists favorably once, let alone extensively.

It is true that R. Avraham ben 'Azriel refers to R. Moshe Taku as a *tzaddik*; however, as Dr. Kanarfogel points out,⁵⁵ R. Avraham ben 'Azriel's version of the *Kesav Tamim* from which he quotes is different from the version with which we are familiar, and R. Avraham does not cite any of R. Moshe Taku's corporealist views at all. To what extent did R. Avraham ben 'Azriel know of R. Moshe Taku's corporealism such that we can draw any conclusion from the former calling the latter a *tzaddik*? We have no way of answering that question.⁵⁶ Moreover, unlike the other two examples that Slifkin had cited – Ra'avad and Ramban, who explicitly state that incorporealism is the core ideology of Judaism – R. Avraham ben 'Azriel makes no such statement. My claim about other *rishonim* who cited Rashi favorably and extensively was about strongly incorporealist *rishonim*, i.e., those for whom incorporealism was the essence of Judaism.⁵⁷ There is no indication from R. Avraham ben 'Azriel's writings that he belongs to this category of *rishonim*. From all of the above, the three cases that Slifkin cites⁵⁸ are not relevant to the claim that I made, and thus do not refute at all what I had stated.

Slifkin then addresses the issue of R. Ya'akov ben Shimshon, a student of Rashi and teacher of Rabbeinu Tam. Relying on the text of *Kesav Tamim* which cites a passage from the commentary on *Avos* composed by R. Ya'akov ben Shimshon, and without seeing the commentary in its original,⁵⁹ Slifkin states that R. Ya'akov ben Shimshon argues that “these misguided individuals [who place a disjunctive cantillation between the words *tzelem* and *Elokim* in *Bereishis* 1:27] ...are motivated by a desire not to attribute a *tzelem* to God, but they are effectively heretics, because the plain sense of the verse clearly demonstrates that God has a

⁵⁵ “Varieties of Belief in Medieval Ashkenaz: The Case of Anthropomorphism,” Daniel Frank and Matt Goldish eds., *Rabbinic Culture and Its Critics: Jewish Authority, Dissent, and Heresy in Medieval and Early Modern Times* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 2008), p. 130.

⁵⁶ The version of *Kesav Tamim* that R. Avraham ben 'Azriel had is no longer extant, as Kanarfogel points out.

⁵⁷ See my article, pp. 39-40. All of the *rishonim* that I cited as part of my claim emphasized incorporealism as the essential doctrine of Judaism and denounced corporealism entirely, as I noted and for which I provided sources in the article.

⁵⁸ I.e., Ra'avad, Ramban, and R. Avraham ben 'Azriel.

⁵⁹ Slifkin cannot be faulted for this, since the critical edition of R. Ya'akov's commentary on *Avos* was not published until after Slifkin had submitted his article to *Hakirah* for publication.

tzelem.”⁶⁰ And so, claims Slifkin, we have here a student of Rashi who is a corporealistic, an indication that Rashi was a corporealistic as well.

This past year, for the first time, a critical edition of R. Ya’akov ben Shimshon’s commentary on *Avos*, based upon medieval manuscripts was published.⁶¹ The authentic text as written by R. Ya’akov ben Shimshon is as follows: “...*she-ne’emar ‘ki ve-tzelem Elokim ‘asah es ha-adam’ – ve-khol ha-mefatfeit ve-doreish es ha-mikra le-dofi lomar ‘ki ve-tzelem Elokim ‘asah es ha-adam’ chayshinan shema min hu.*”⁶² The unpunctuated citation of the verse toward the end of R. Ya’akov’s comment is ambiguous, and thus requires explanation. Now let us look at R. Moshe Taku’s citation of R. Ya’akov’s comment. In his *Kesav Tamim*, R. Moshe wrote, “*ve-ha-Rav Ya’akov bar Shimshon she-pireish masekhes Avos kasav sham she-mi she-mefareish ‘be-tzalmo be-tzelem Elokim barah oso’ chayshinan shema min hu, ke-lomar mi she-oseh pesek eitzel ‘be-tzelem’ mi-shum she-rotzeh lomar she-ain ha-Kadosh barukh hu tzelem.*”⁶³ With the critical edition of R. Ya’akov’s commentary now available, it is clear beyond any doubt that R. Moshe Taku was not **quoting** R. Ya’akov; rather, he was presenting a summary of R. Ya’akov’s view according to his (R. Moshe’s) own interpretation.⁶⁴ In fact, as Katzenellenbogen points out,⁶⁵ the editor of *Machzor Vitry* and Ra’avan interpreted R. Ya’akov’s comment, due to the unpunctuated verse’s ambiguity mentioned earlier, in exactly the opposite way that R. Moshe did. Katzenellenbogen also points out⁶⁶ that ibn ‘Ezra, in his commentary on *Bereishis* 1:26, also says that one who injects a disjunctive cantillation between the words *tzelem* and *Elokim* presents an explanation that is “*chaseir lev*” and that this is a Karaite way of explaining the verse. Thus, even if R. Moshe’s reading of the ambiguity in R. Ya’akov’s comment is correct, he (R. Ya’akov) need not have meant his comment to be corporealistic at all; he could well have meant it exactly as ibn ‘Ezra, a known incorporealistic, explains – that one should not read the verse as the Karaites did.

⁶⁰ Slifkin (2010), p. 58.

⁶¹ M. L. Katzenellenbogen, ed., *Mishnas Re’uvain Masekhes Avos* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook 2009), volume II.

⁶² Ibid, pp. 78-79.

⁶³ I. Blumenfeld, ed., *Ozar Nechmad* (Vienna: Knopflmacher and Son Publishers 1860), pp. 59-60.

⁶⁴ The only phrase that is identical in both R. Ya’akov’s comment and R. Moshe’s presentation is “*chayshinan shema min hu.*” Everything else is different, including the verses upon which the entire exposition is purported to be based.

⁶⁵ *Mishnas Re’uvain Masekhes Avos*, volume II, p. 79, footnote 3.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

From all of the above it is evident that one cannot state with any veracity that R. Ya'akov ben Shimshom was a corporealist. The only thing one can state with any veracity is that R. Moshe Taku saw R. Ya'akov as being a corporealist. Does this mean that R. Ya'akov was indeed a corporealist? Let us take note that R. Moshe Taku, who vehemently disagreed with the views expressed in *Emunos VeDe'os*, also proposed that R. Sa'adyah Gaon did not write the work, and that it was arbitrarily attributed to him(!)⁶⁷ Let us also take note that R. Moshe Taku was in error concerning at least half of the bibliographical references cited in *Kesav Tamim*.⁶⁸ Thus, Slifkin's support concerning Rashi's corporealism inferred from R. Ya'akov's alleged corporealism is not at all evidentiary.

And this brings us to the next point. Slifkin maintained that he was able to discern better than the *rishonim* what Rashi's stance was with regard to corporealism, because "they did not ever set out to discover if Rashi was a corporealist" the way that he did. I have already explained why Slifkin's claim here fails;⁶⁹ however, I neglected to note that R. Moshe Taku, who, in his *Kesav Tamim*, was looking for support for his corporealistic views among the great rabbinic sages, was able to bring only Rashi's **disciple** for support.⁷⁰ Why did R. Moshe not cite Rashi himself? Rashi was no stranger to R. Moshe; he cites him often enough. Why cite R. Ya'akov's comment about "*tzelem*" when he could have cited Rashi's comment about "*deyukan*," which, according to Slifkin's original article,⁷¹ clearly reflects Rashi's corporealism? We may ask an analogous question regarding R. Aharon Aboulrabi's commentary on the Torah, a commentary which focused on Rashi.⁷² R. Aharon had no problem criticizing Rashi harshly, referring to his explanations as "a *derash* of barbarians," "a worthless *derash*," "*derash* of a dolt," and "words of 'hot air'."⁷³ R. Aharon was also a known incorporealist.⁷⁴ Yet, when citing Rashi's comment on *Bemidbar* 11:17 concerning God's "descent" to meet with Moshe, the only criticism of Rashi that R. Aharon presents is that Rashi should have explained the reasons behind the ten "descents"

⁶⁷ See Joseph Dan, "The Book of Divine Glory by Rabbi Judah of Regensburg," in Joseph Dan and Klaus Herrmann eds., *Studies in Jewish Manuscripts* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck 1999), p. 7, footnote 21.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 8.

⁶⁹ Zucker, p. 42.

⁷⁰ As noted above, the support came from R. Moshe's interpretation of R. Ya'akov's words, not from the words themselves.

⁷¹ Slifkin (2009), p. 99.

⁷² See E. Lawee, "Rashi's Resisting Readers" in Jay M. Harris, ed., *Maimonides After 800 Years* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2007), pp. 196-198.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 197.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 197-198.

listed in the Torah.⁷⁵ According to Slifkin,⁷⁶ it is clear that Rashi viewed God's "descent" as literal. And yet, here we have an unequivocally incorporealist *rishon* who wrote a harshly critical work on Rashi, and when dealing with the issue of "descent" his only criticism is that Rashi should have explained a reason instead of merely mentioning that there were ten "descents"? Following Slifkin's claim, we must now assume that Slifkin knew better than the incorporealist *rishonim* who were not critical of Rashi, **and** the incorporealist *rishonim* who **were** critical of Rashi, **and** the corporealist *rishon* who sought support for his views but neglected to cite Rashi among this support.

At this point Slifkin concludes his objections to my evidence that Rashi was indeed an incorporealist. His objection to my first area of evidence (the Israelites' testimony from the opening of the heavens) – that from Rashi's "equation" of "above and below" with "in front and behind" he must have viewed God as spatially above the world – has been shown to be false. His objection to my second area of evidence (Rashi's comment about God's "right and left") – that one ought to read the comment of Rashi differently from the standard way, or that the textual version is not accurate – has been shown to be untenable. His objection to my third area of evidence (Rashi's comment about God "walking") – that I incorrectly inserted the word "therefore" (in brackets) in the translation, and that perhaps God was too big to walk with the people – has been shown to be illogical. And his objection to my fourth area of evidence (the view of Rashi among the other *rishonim*) – that Rashi's disciple was a corporealist and that Slifkin saw what the others did not see – has been shown not to take into account vital factual information. With all of these objections failing to stand the test of logical analysis and factual accuracy, the evidence for Rashi's incorporealism stands firm.

PAGES 61-69 – The Alleged Corporealism of the Rabbinic Elite of Medieval Northern France

Slifkin had argued in his original article⁷⁷ that "numerous...sources attest to the existence of Torah scholars, **not laymen**,⁷⁸ who believed in God's corporeality. Thus it is certainly conceivable that Rashi was part of this group...with the testimony of Ramban and other *rishonim*

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 198.

⁷⁶ Slifkin (2009), pp. 96-98.

⁷⁷ Slifkin (2009), pp. 82-83, 104.

⁷⁸ Emphasis added.

that there were many great Torah scholars in France who were corporealists, one cannot dismiss the fact that one of those scholars could easily have been Rashi.” This argument is based upon three factual premises: [1] elite Torah scholars, not laymen, in northern France believed in God’s corporeality; [2] these elite Torah scholars were many; and [3] they lived during Rashi’s time. If corporealism was maintained by the regular townsfolk but not by the rabbinic elite, this would have no bearing whatsoever as to Rashi’s maintaining a corporealistic view. If there were rabbinic elite who maintained a corporealistic view, but they were not significant at all in terms of numbers, this would also have no bearing on Rashi’s maintaining a corporealistic view. And if there was no presence of a corporealist rabbinic elite during the time that Rashi flourished, this would likewise have no bearing on Rashi maintaining a corporealistic view. Thus, in order to press his argument, Slifkin needs to provide evidence that these three premises are true. Does he succeed? Let us see.

Slifkin cited R. Avraham ben HaRambam’s lament regarding the French corporealists as his (Slifkin’s) first source to support his claim.⁷⁹ But the exact quote from R. Avraham⁸⁰ as to who these corporealists were is, “many people overseas, who are among the dwellers of the islands and faraway lands.” There is no indication whatsoever that he refers to rabbinic elite, as opposed to laymen. Similarly, Slifkin cites E. Urbach who pointed out that R. El’azar Roke’ach revealed his approach to prayer “precisely to combat the anthropomorphism of [his] contemporaries.”⁸¹ Who are these “contemporaries”? We need not guess; as Urbach points out,⁸² quoting R. El’azar himself, he addressed his work to “*kol adam*” – people in general – there is no indication whatsoever that he refers to the rabbinic elite. Further, Slifkin tries to affirm that *Chasidei Ashkenaz* burned heretical works composed by corporealists, thus “indicating that these corporealists were obviously capable of producing Torah scholarship.”⁸³ By this logic, all of the Karaite authors were members of the rabbinic elite, since there were Rabbinites who burned their works. Of course, this does not follow whatsoever, and the fact that someone is capable of writing a heretical book worthy of incineration does not, ipso facto, make the author one of the rabbinic elite. Thus, from these sources, Slifkin has not shown at all that

⁷⁹ Slifkin (2010), p. 62.

⁸⁰ *Milchamos HaShem*, Re’uvain Margolioth, ed., (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook 1963), p. 52.

⁸¹ Slifkin (2010), p. 63.

⁸² *Arugas HaBosem*, Ephraim Urbach, ed., (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim 1963), volume IV, p. 74.

⁸³ Slifkin (2010), p. 64. I believe that Slifkin, in footnote 41, meant to cite *Arugas HaBosem* volume IV, not volume I.

there were any members of the rabbinic elite who were corporealists in medieval northern France.

Reiterating what he wrote in his original article, Slifkin cites R. Shemuel ben Mordechai of Marseilles, who had written that “the majority of the wise men of France are *magshimim*.”⁸⁴ I had responded to this issue in my article by citing Dr. Kanarfogel who explained that “from R. Shemuel’s own perspective as a staunch Maimonidean, the views of most of the Torah scholars of France would be considered corporealism; it does **not** mean that R. Shemuel was reporting that these scholars maintained that God has a body.”⁸⁵ Slifkin responded by stating, “Suffice it to say that I believe Zucker to be somewhat misrepresenting Rabbi Dr. Kanarfogel’s position regarding R. Shmuel ben Mordechai, though most likely unintentionally.”⁸⁶ I am at a loss as to how to understand Slifkin’s response, since in the course of the website discussion with Slifkin I had asked Rabbi Dr. Kanarfogel to confirm to me in writing what his views were on this issue; Kanarfogel did so by sending an e-mail to me, which I posted verbatim on Slifkin’s website.⁸⁷ I can well understand how an interpretation can be misrepresentative; I cannot understand how Kanarfogel’s own words in writing, verbatim, can be misrepresentative. Slifkin may not be comfortable with what Kanarfogel said, but he did indeed say it.

Slifkin challenged Kanarfogel’s interpretation of R. Shemuel ben Mordechai by asking if it is likely that a Maimonidean would use the word “*magshimim*” to mean “those who meet the strict Maimonidean definition of the term.” Rather, claims Slifkin, the term “*magshimim*” likely means “people who believe that God is corporeal.”⁸⁸ However, a review of Rambam’s *Moreh HaNevukhim* I:35-36 and the last sections of R. Avraham ben HaRambam’s *Milchamos HaShem*⁸⁹ reveals that the staunch Maimonideans clearly did use the term “*hagshamah*” precisely to mean the application of attributes such as emotion, movement, etc. to God, **even if the person who applies these attributes to God affirms that He does not have physical form.** We have here clear evidence that Kanarfogel’s interpretation of R. Shemuel ben Mordechai’s statement is well within the common usage of the term “*magshimim*” as used by the

⁸⁴ Slifkin (2010), p. 62.

⁸⁵ Zucker, pp. 16-17.

⁸⁶ Slifkin (2010), p. 62, footnote 34.

⁸⁷ Zucker, p. 17. The verbatim quote can be found on Slifkin’s website in the comments to the thread “Seeing No Image” August 5, 2009, 5:45 pm.

⁸⁸ Slifkin (2010), pp. 62-63.

⁸⁹ Margolioth edition, pp. 69-73.

Maimonideans themselves, and thus to use R. Shemuel's statement as "evidence" that the majority of the French rabbinic elite were corporealists in the sense that Slifkin means is without solid basis.⁹⁰

Addressing Ramban's statement that the doctrine of incorporealism is to be found in the writings of *chakhmei Tzorfas* (in the plural), Slifkin counters with "in fact Ramban only cites one such authority, R. Elazar of Worms."⁹¹ That is certainly true; however, Ramban's citing only one **example** does not change the fact that he did say unequivocally that French rabbis (in the plural) maintained the doctrine of incorporealism.

And this brings us to the important questions of "who" and "how many" were the French rabbis to whom Ramban addressed his letter. Slifkin dismisses these questions by stating no matter which and how many rabbis Ramban addressed, "it is certainly evidence for corporealist views in France."⁹² I have already addressed this issue in my article;⁹³ however, I think an elaboration of that explanation is in order. Slifkin made the claim that the French rabbinic elite were corporealists in order to provide evidence for Rashi's corporealism. The argument goes as follows: if we know that Rashi's peer group were corporealists, it is very likely that he was a corporealist as well. If that argument is to hold, the numbers and the type of rabbis who were corporealists is quite important. Let me explain by way of example. If, in a few hundred years, one wanted to infer what the ideological position of R. Moshe Feinstein, ז"ל, was on a given issue, it would be one thing to argue that we can infer his position from the known position of the

⁹⁰ In my article I had cited a responsum by R. Avraham ben HaRambam chiding a zealous Maimonidean for mislabeling the French rabbis as corporealists. Slifkin countered by saying that R. Avraham says nothing at all about them as corporealists. (See Slifkin (2010), p. 62, footnote 32). R. Avraham's responsum refers to an incident depicted in *Teshuvot Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam*, p. 15, wherein the questioner, R. Yosef ben Gershon, stated, "...and he [R. Avraham ben HaRambam's student] called all of the French rabbis 'minim' and 'kofrim' and 'people who attributed to the Creator a body, image, and form.' ... I do not agree with his claims at all..." Regarding the concluding part of this statement, R. Avraham ben HaRambam concurred (p. 18), referring to the French Jews as "*kesheirim*." Now, we may ask, by what basis did the zealous student call the French Jews corporealists? They did not attribute to God a body, as reported by R. Yosef and as confirmed by R. Avraham (and this alone is clear proof that Slifkin is wrong to claim that the French rabbinic elite were corporealists based upon the "testimony" of R. Avraham ben HaRambam), so in what sense could they have been called corporealists at all? The answer is that to a staunch Maimonidean, if someone were to apply the attributes of emotion, movement, etc. to the Creator, even while affirming that He does not have a body, he is still, in reality, a corporealist. R. Avraham's disagreement with his zealous student lies in the fact that such a corporealist is far better than a complete one, insofar as he is on the path toward truth, as R. Avraham explicitly states in *Milchamos HaShem* pp. 69, 71.

⁹¹ Slifkin (2010), p. 63.

⁹² Slifkin (2010), pp. 63-64.

⁹³ Zucker, p. 19, footnote 21.

majority of his peers on the *Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah*; it would be quite another thing to infer his position from the known position of a handful of local synagogue and communal rabbis.⁹⁴ If Ramban were addressing a great number of rabbinic elite, then Slifkin's argument may be viable; if he were addressing a handful of communal rabbis, then his argument does not get off the ground. Since we have no way of knowing who or how many these rabbis were, Slifkin's argument is not at all evidentiary.⁹⁵

In an attempt to address this issue, Slifkin cited a responsum of MaHaRaM al-Ashkar,⁹⁶ which states that the “*gedolim be-chokhmas haTalmud*” in France were corporealists. What Slifkin neglected to state was that the full quote from al-Ashkar is “...like the corporealism that was espoused in public in France and in a few [other] places, by those who were great in the wisdom of the Talmud, **as it appears** from the letter that Ramban sent...”⁹⁷ MaHaRaM, an *acharon* writing in the sixteenth century, did not claim to know factually that the French corporealists were great rabbis; he assumed it solely from reading Ramban's letter, just as Slifkin assumes it. However, it is one thing to assume something solely from Ramban's words; it is quite another thing to use this assumption as a “fact” in evidence toward a claim that someone else was a corporealist.

And then there is the statement by R. Meir ben Shim'on HaMe'ili, a colleague of Ramban, whom Slifkin quotes as additional evidence that the French rabbinic elite were corporealists.⁹⁸ The quote that Slifkin cites from HaMe'ili, concerning those who maintained a corporealist view, is that they were “very wise people, righteous...” Let us see. The full text of HaMe'ili, from which Slifkin took the quote is translated below. (I have emphasized certain nouns and pronouns for the purpose of clarity, as will be understood momentarily).

The honor of the Ra'avad remains in its place, because God forbid – the Rambam, ז”ל, did not mean by this [calling a corporealist a heretic] one who has not grasped by the power of his intellect [well enough] to maintain that God is not a body and is not limited.

⁹⁴ And, of course, it would also be quite another thing to infer R. Moshe's position from the known position of the “*ba'alei batim*” of his time.

⁹⁵ It should be noted that there is one *rishon*, R. Yeda'yah HaPenini, who characterized Ramban's addressees as “*ha-eisanim Rabbanei Tzorfas ba-yamim ha-heim*” (cited in *Teshuvos HaRashba* I:418). However, this very same source also points out that the corporealism of Ramban's addressees altogether was not at all factually certain – “*ha-hagshamah asher he'eshimuhu 'aleha kim'dumeh*” (emphasis added).

⁹⁶ Slifkin (2010), p. 64.

⁹⁷ *Teshuvos MaHaRam al-Alshkar*, siman 117. Emphasis added.

⁹⁸ Slifkin (2010), p. 64.

For the majority of **our masses – men, women, youth** – maintain this idea due to the strength of their foolishness and the paucity of their intelligence. **They** also think that God has a limitation in that He dwells in the heavens alone, yet **they** say that his kingdom and rule is on the earth. **They** bring support for this view from the literal meaning of the translator [Onkelos] in his explanation [of the verse] “For God, He is the Lord in the heavens above and on the earth below.” He [Onkelos] explained, “His presence is in the heavens above and He rules on the earth below.” **They** also rely on many words of a few of our Sages in their literal meaning, such as was stated, “One who elongates the word ‘*Echad*’ too much [it is not fitting] because once [the reader of the *Shema*] crowns Him above and below and in the four directions, more is not necessary.” Nevertheless, it is not fitting to say about any one of **them** that he should be called a *min* or a *kofer* because **they are all very wise people, righteous and good**, experienced in miracles due to the abundance of their merits, as is reported in the stories about them in many places. Furthermore, the verses of the Torah and Prophets do not mislead people to become *minim*, and people do not lose their *emunah* due to [these verses]. Rather, [the Rambam] intended [in his statement about corporealists as *minim*] he who comes to a conclusion by the power of his intellect and by his decision-making that [corporealism] is true, and he comes to argue with the Sages of the Torah who understand [the truth]. About that person who argues did [the Rambam], ז”ל, say what he did, not about the ones of **the masses and the goodly women** who fear sin, because **they** are favorable to God, may He be blessed. And even though **they** do not recognize or comprehend the deep ideas, still, **they** live with their pure heart and follow the *emunah* of the righteous in this path.⁹⁹

It is unequivocally clear that the phrase “very wise people, righteous and good” refers to the antecedent noun phrase “our masses – men, women, and youth” who are characterized by “the strength of their foolishness and the paucity of their intelligence...they do not recognize or comprehend the deep ideas;” they are the “masses and goodly women” who “fear sin...they live with their pure heart...” HaMe’ili explicitly and absolutely does not refer here to the rabbinic elite; yet Slifkin, taking one phrase out of context, presents this quote as a support that the rabbinic elite of France were corporealists. This presentation exceeds the bounds of any sense of credibility.

It is possible that the following question may have motivated Slifkin in his claim: how can HaMe’ili refer to the same group of people as foolish and lacking intelligence, and also as very wise, righteous, and good.¹⁰⁰ Before answering this question, let us note that the existence

⁹⁹ See M. Halbertal, *Bein Torah LeChokhmah* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press 2001), pp. 125-126.

¹⁰⁰ Dr. Halbertal, as well, had suggested (ibid) that HaMe’ili was referring to the rabbinic elite. I contacted Dr. Halbertal, asking him to please review an earlier version of this essay, highlighting my argument that HaMe’ili was referring to the masses and not to the rabbinic elite. In response, I received the following e-mail from Dr. Halbertal

of this question does not change the fact that the only group of people to whom HaMe'ili refers in his entire statement is the masses – not the rabbinic elite. Having said that, I believe that the answer to the question is that in calling the masses very wise and righteous, HaMe'ili is paraphrasing the Talmudic passage of *'Eruvin 53b*, where R. Yehoshu'a ben Chananyah, upon being bested in arguments by a woman and two children, exclaimed, “Fortunate are you O Israel, that all of you are very wise people, from your greatest to your smallest.” Clearly, R. Yehoshu'a was not referring to the woman and two children as the rabbinic elite of Israel. Slifkin's claim with regard to HaMe'ili is thus shown to be completely without merit.¹⁰¹

In a similar case, Slifkin cited RiD / Riaz as a source that demonstrates that there were “**scholars** [in Rashi's homeland of France] who believed in a corporeal God.”¹⁰² RiD's actual words are, “*kevar chashvu bnei adam...ve-hitchayvah lahem ha-hagshamah ha-gemurah ve-he'eminu bah...*”¹⁰³ RiD is clearly referring here to “**people**” who believed in corporealism; **nowhere** does he state or imply that he is referring to the rabbinic elite. Riaz states¹⁰⁴ that despite the fact that corporealism is false, one who believes it “innocently” is not considered to be a heretic. If corporealism is heresy, argues Riaz, then the sages of the Talmud would have demanded that “women and ‘*amei ha-aretz*’” be educated about incorporealism; even “some of the Talmudic sages themselves, who did not turn their attention to contemplate the idea of *Elokus*, innocently believed in the literal meaning of the Torah's verses that God has a form”¹⁰⁵ – and they are certainly not considered heretics. **Nowhere** does Riaz state or imply that any of the French rabbinic elite were corporealists; he speaks about **people** in general, and some Talmudic sages in particular, who made an innocent mistake about corporealism.¹⁰⁶ This is the fourth

on December 23, 2010, reproduced here in its entirety, verbatim: “Many thanks for sending me your article. You are making a good case and it seems that your reading is right. The essay itself is impressive and thorough.”

¹⁰¹ After seeing an earlier version of this essay, Slifkin responded to my challenge regarding his citation of HaMe'ili by stating (www.rationalistjudaism.com, “They Could Say It, We Cannot,” August 8, 2010, comments of 4:20 pm, 4:27 pm, 10:49 pm) that the inclusion of HaMe'ili as a source in his article was not his own idea; it was suggested by a “scholar whom [Slifkin] greatly admire[s].” Slifkin did take “full responsibility for relying on someone without checking their source.”

¹⁰² Slifkin (2009), pp. 81-82 (emphasis added). Slifkin cites the source here as Riaz, but in the “Letters” section of *Hakirah* volume 8, p. 11, he points out that he is referring to two sources, Riaz and his grandfather, RiD.

¹⁰³ See Kanarfogel, p. 157, footnote 108 (emphasis added). Regarding the general context of RiD's quote, see Kanarfogel pp. 134-135.

¹⁰⁴ G. Lazebnik, ed., *Sanhedrei Gedolah* (Jerusalem: Machon Harry Fischel 1972), volume 5, section 2, pp. 117-118.

¹⁰⁵ Riaz, here, differs from Ramban who had written to the French rabbis that incorporealism was universally accepted as the doctrine of Judaism, from our forefathers through “all the sages.” See Ramban's letter, pp. 346-347.

¹⁰⁶ Note that Slifkin is not arguing merely that Rashi **could** have professed corporealism (in which case the minority of Talmudic sages according to Riaz could be a precedent for such a possibility); Slifkin is arguing that Rashi **did**

instance¹⁰⁷ where Slifkin, seeking to demonstrate that *rishonim* testified as to the existence of French rabbinic elite corporealists, cited a *rishon* who spoke about “people,” not the French rabbinic elite.¹⁰⁸

I had claimed in my article that there were only three identifiable corporealist rabbinic scholars in Northern France, none of whom was born until at least one-hundred years after Rashi’s death.¹⁰⁹ Slifkin counters by stating that two other names should be added to this list, R. Ya’akov ben Shimshon and R. Elchanan ben Yakar. We have already seen that R. Ya’akov ben Shimshon cannot validly be added to this list,¹¹⁰ and the inclusion of R. Elchanan, who, Slifkin fails to mention, lived in thirteenth century London, is irrelevant to Slifkin’s claim, as he was not part of the French rabbinic elite whatsoever. So it remains that there are only three identifiable corporealist French rabbis, none of whom lived until well after Rashi had died, from which I inferred that there is no reason to believe that the doctrine of corporeality among the French rabbinic elite was at all significant. Slifkin responds to this by saying that I have it “exactly backwards. There is every reason to believe that corporealism was **more** prevalent during Rashi’s lifetime than a century later” due to the increasing influence of Rambam.¹¹¹ I do not know how to respond to this claim other than to point out that it is a well-held maxim that

profess corporealism, and in arguing that point, Slifkin claims that Rashi is no different from other contemporaneous French scholars. He cites Riaz in an attempt to show the historical reality of the French scholars’ corporealism. However, Riaz’s statement has nothing to do with any of the French scholars at all.

¹⁰⁷ The other three are R. Avraham ben HaRambam, R. El’azar Roke’ach, and HaMe’ili, as described above.

¹⁰⁸ In his original article, Slifkin had claimed (p. 82) that a statement by Rambam in his *Ma’amar Techiyas HaMeisim*, attests to the existence of rabbinic elite corporealists. This statement by Rambam is an almost exact parallel, in phraseology and in content, to his description of “the first of the three sects” in his *Peirush HaMishnah* on *Sanhedrin*, (introduction to chapter 10). There, Rambam explicitly states that he is referring to the “*darshanim*” who would preach to the populace, something akin to a communal synagogue rabbi, not the rabbinic elite. (For the clear connotation of “*darshanim*” as communal synagogue rabbis and not the rabbinic elite, see *Teshuvos HaRambam*, J. Blau edition, responsum 110). In fact, R. Yosef Qafih, in his edition of the *Peirush HaMishnah* on *Sanhedrin* (p. 136, footnote 41), already pointed out that the rabbis mentioned in the *Ma’amar Techiyas HaMeisim* passage are these very same *darshanim* mentioned in the *Peirush HaMishnah* passage. Thus, Slifkin’s citation of Rambam here is misrepresentative. (For another iteration explaining Slifkin’s mistake in this area, see www.rationalistjudaism.com, “Not Everything,” September 1, 2010, comment of 2:35 pm).

¹⁰⁹ Slifkin is, of course, correct in pointing out my mistake in identifying one of these as R. Avraham ben ‘Azriel, and not R. Nechemiah ben Shelomo. In preparing my article for *Hakirah*, I took notes on the sources that I was going to use, listing them in three columns per notebook page, the first column being the quote itself, the second being the author of the quote, and the third being the source in whose work the quote was found. In writing about R. Nechemiah, I inadvertently copied the name that was in my third column, that of R. Avraham ben ‘Azriel, in whose work ‘*Arugas HaBosem*, I had seen R. Nechemiah’s quote, instead of copying the name of the quote’s author from the second column. I am grateful to Rabbi Slifkin for the correction. The three rabbinic corporealists were R. Moshe Taku, R. Shelomo Simchah of Troyes, and R. Nechemiah ben Shelomo.

¹¹⁰ See earlier, pp. 11-13.

¹¹¹ Slifkin (2010), p. 67. Emphasis in the original.

“absence of evidence is not evidence of absence;” yet here Slifkin is claiming that “absence of evidence is evidence of presence.”

Slifkin adds that R. Moshe Taku and R. Shelomo Simcha of Troyes had referred to incorporealism as innovative, thus showing that corporealism was the established view of rabbinic Ashkenaz. He states that “it is simply not reasonable to do anything other than take them at their word that they are the conservatives lashing out at their fellow Ashkenazim for succumbing to new, radical ideas...” Of course they viewed themselves as traditional – based upon their reading of the Torah and the Talmud in a literal way, not based upon a *mesorah* of Ashkenazic rabbis handed down from generation to generation. The support that they adduce for their claim comes in the form of verses in the Torah and Talmudic passages as they interpret them, not from the claim that this is what our fathers and teachers have taught us for generations. Parenthetically, Ramban’s claim for incorporealism **is** that this doctrine, universal among **all of Israel** is what our fathers and teachers have taught us for generations.

So, from the standpoint of evidence, we have no known French rabbinic elite during Rashi’s time who espoused corporealism, and only three known such rabbis one-hundred years after Rashi’s death. Consistent with this fact, Kanarfogel stated, “If the criteria set forth by Nahmanides in his letter are used as a measuring stick, only those Ashkenazic scholars who held positions more anthropomorphic than the non-esoteric...view(s) of Rabbi Eleazar of Worms and Rabbi Judah he-Hasid could be considered believers in divine corporeality (*magshimim*)... Indeed, we have been unable to positively identify any Ashkenazic rabbinic scholars who espoused radical (or crude) forms of anthropomorphism. The positions of Rabbi Moses Taku and *Sefer ha-Maskil* did not include overt or fixed divine corporeality and, in any case, these positions do not seem to have had much of an impact on subsequent Ashkenazic rabbinic literature.”¹¹² This brings us to an important issue that I raised in my article, to which Slifkin did not respond at all. Aside from the fact that none of the three known French rabbinic scholar corporealists lived before or during Rashi’s lifetime, not one of them espoused the corporealism that Slifkin would have us believe Rashi maintained. None of them held that God has a fixed-form body, and in fact, R. Moshe Taku vociferously opposed such an idea, as Slifkin has

¹¹² Kanarfogel, p. 137. It is therefore strange that Slifkin (2010, p. 65) objects to my report that Kanarfogel writes about the total number of Torah scholars in northern France altogether who were corporealists as being indeed quite small.

admitted.¹¹³ Thus, to make the claim that we know Rashi to have been a corporealism from the fact that his colleagues were corporealists – while these known “colleagues” were three people who were born well after Rashi died, and who espoused a corporealism that was not at all in accord with Rashi’s alleged corporealism – is a claim that defies all reason.

PAGES 69-72 – Slifkin’s Argument from Silence

Responding¹¹⁴ to my critique of his argument from silence, Slifkin stated that if I were correct about Rashi’s incorporealism, Rashi should have been explicit about what he maintained; “how could Rashi allow his readers to take it for granted that...anthropomorphic expressions are non-literal?”¹¹⁵ The question is an important one; why, indeed, would Rashi not write, just once, in an **explicit** way – “God does not have a body”? As has been amply demonstrated with numerous sources, much of the **laity** of French Jewry during the time of Rashi were corporealists,¹¹⁶ whose entire worldview of the Torah and of Judaism involved the concept of a tangible God. The majority of incorporealist sages maintained that corporealists such as the French laity were not heretics and that their share in the world to come was not negated by their “innocent” corporealist ideology.¹¹⁷ If Rashi, an incorporealist, held this majority view of his colleagues, it makes perfect sense that he would not attempt to demolish their worldview, at the risk of putting their entire allegiance to Torah and to Judaism at risk, by explicitly pointing out something that ran contrary to their cherished beliefs.¹¹⁸ Instead, Rashi incorporated the doctrine

¹¹³ See his website, February 2010, comment on the thread “*Kesav Tamim*,” February 18, 2010 2:42 pm.

¹¹⁴ Slifkin began his response (p. 69) by stating, “Zucker first claims that arguments from silence are fallacious, but then admits that this is not actually true...” My actual words were, “...‘conspicuous absence’ is known **in the academic world of pure reasoning** as *argumentum ex silentio*, and is classified in that world as a fallacy. Nevertheless, in certain circumstances of **applied reasoning** it may be used as a valid form of abduction...” See Zucker, p. 19, (emphasis added). I leave it to the reader to decide whether Slifkin presented an accurate description of what I had written.

¹¹⁵ Slifkin (2010), p. 70.

¹¹⁶ Slifkin had stated (p. 68), “Zucker seems reluctant to accept the existence of corporealists in the medieval period beyond those that are utterly undeniable.” Again, (on p. 78) he states, “Zucker’s claim that there were hardly any corporealists in Rashi’s time...” If his implication is that I do not accept the significant numbers of **any** corporealists during the medieval period, it is a gross misrepresentation of my article. I had claimed that the presence of corporealists among the **rabbinic elite** – an idea central to Slifkin’s argument – was unsupported by **any evidence**. Corporealism among the laity of French Jews at the time was a different matter, and I never stated otherwise.

¹¹⁷ Rambam is a notable exception to this majority view.

¹¹⁸ In fact, in a historically completely unrelated – but analogous – case, ibn Rushd, a staunch incorporealist, advocated for not disturbing the masses with regard to their corporealist beliefs lest the entire religious community suffer great upheaval. See Aviezer Ravitzky, *Iyunim Maimoniyim* (Jerusalem: Shoken Publishing House 2006), p. 71. And, in fact, Riaz states that the sages of Israel, who were incorporealists, traditionally kept their view hidden from the masses. See *Sanhedrei Gedolah*, volume 5, part 2, p. 118.

of incorporeality in his commentary in such a way that the discerning, logically sophisticated reader will see it, and the remaining readers would be able to stay strong in their allegiance to Judaism and still merit a share in the world to come.¹¹⁹

Ironically, Slifkin claimed, as part of his response here, that Rashi indeed was explicit about his corporealism, when, in his commentary on *Bereishis* 1:27, he wrote that man was made in the *deyukan* of his Creator.¹²⁰ If Rashi was indeed explicit about his corporealism, as Slifkin claims, then Slifkin's argument – that he was able to discern Rashi's view better than all the *rishonim* who explicitly stated that Rashi was an incorporealist, because “in order to [discover if Rashi was a corporealist] one would have to collect all of Rashi's comments from *Tanakh* and *Chazal* on this topic...which would have been especially difficult in the days before printed books”¹²¹ – is completely undermined. Further, Slifkin's claim here is specious since Ramban, a known incorporealist, cites Rashi's explanation about *deyukan* favorably,¹²² so that the term *deyukan* according to Ramban's understanding of Rashi is allegorical.¹²³ In fact, the Talmud itself uses the term *deyukan* regarding God in a number of places.¹²⁴ Now, incorporealists also had to learn those passages in the Talmud; they obviously did so by understanding the term *deyukan*, as it relates to God, in an allegorical way, and they did so, often without any comment on their part that the term is allegorical. Further, Rashi, in his commentary on *Bereishis* 1:26, says that the definition of *demus* with regard to God is “*le-havin u-le-haskil*,” hardly a corporealistic definition at all.

Slifkin's second challenge to my critique of his *argumentum ex silentio* is that I was wrong to claim that *Devarim* 29:19 (“*ye-eshan af HaShem*”) has anything to do with shortness of breath such that Rashi would have to point out that the verse is allegorical due to weakness in the imagery.¹²⁵ I do not understand this challenge, because Rashi himself says explicitly in his

¹¹⁹ Slifkin commented about this point as expressed in an earlier version of this essay by stating (www.zootorah.com/ZuckerClosingStatement.pdf), “Zucker argues that Rashi deliberately allowed the masses to continue with these heretical beliefs, for their own benefit...” He appears to have missed a major point of my explanation: for most *rishonim*, “innocent” corporealism was **not** a “heretical belief,” and therefore, a Jewish leader could well allow the masses to continue with their cherished belief, and not risk losing them to Judaism altogether.

¹²⁰ Slifkin (2010), p. 71, footnote 51.

¹²¹ Slifkin (2010), p. 60.

¹²² See Ramban on *Devarim* 21:22.

¹²³ Parenthetically, Ramban felt no need to explain that this was an allegory; he left it to the reader's understanding.

¹²⁴ See, for example, *Mo'ed Katan* 15b, *Bava Basra* 58a, and *Chullin* 91b.

¹²⁵ Slifkin (2010), p. 71.

commentary on *Shemos* 15:8¹²⁶ “when someone’s temper is at rest, his breath is long...and when he is angry, his breath is short...and every [term of] “*af*” and “*charon*” in the Bible I explain thus...” *Devarim* 29:19 speaks of *af HaShem*, and therefore it is clearly referring to imagery involving shortness of breath. Slifkin further objects to my explanation that Rashi commented explicitly as to the allegorical nature of a *pasuk* when the imagery of the metaphor implies a weakness of God, by stating that *Shemos* 15:8, which speaks of the *ruach af* of *HaShem*, has a connotation of great power, not weakness, thus making my explanation “positively ludicrous.”¹²⁷ Slifkin here is making an elementary mistake in logic, confusing a cause and an effect. The “effect” depicted in *Shemos* 15:8 is that “the waters were heaped up, the running water stood straight as a wall, and the deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea.” The “cause” of this was “the *ruach af*” – that is, the anger – of *HaShem*, as is described by the immediately preceding *pasuk*, “*teshalach charonekha...*” The effect, of course, is a great display of power and might; the cause – anger, which involves shortness of breath – reflects a weakness, about which Rashi felt he had to comment. Note that Rashi’s comments relate to the imagery of the cause, not the effect.

Slifkin’s third objection to my explanation of Rashi is that “there is a place where Rashi chooses to interpret anthropomorphisms in a way that implies weakness on the part of God, without making any comment about it being non-literal.”¹²⁸ He refers to Rashi’s comments on *Sanhedrin* 98b, where “the possessor of all might clutches his loins in distress” is interpreted by Rashi as referring to God. But, according to my explanation Rashi would not need to point out that the Talmud is to be understood allegorically. I claimed that Rashi explicitly points out that a *pasuk* is allegorical when its imagery implies weakness on God’s part. That is, if the *pasuk* says that God is short of breath, Rashi needs to point out that this is only *kiviyakhol* – it is only an allegory. The Talmud in *Sanhedrin* is analyzing the *pasuk* in *Yirmiyahu* (30:6), which, from the very context of the *pasuk* itself, is explicitly a parable (about God, according to Rashi), not a description of God Himself. It is one thing for a *pasuk* to state that God is short of breath; it is another thing to state a parable about a man and then say that the parable teaches a lesson about God. When speaking of God Himself, where the image involves weakness, Rashi points out

¹²⁶ Which, I assume, Slifkin saw, as he himself quotes that comment of Rashi on page 71 of his article.

¹²⁷ Slifkin (2010), p. 71.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

“*kiviyakhol*.” When dealing with something that presents itself explicitly as a parable, the “*kiviyakhol*” is already there, in the *pasuk*, and pointing out that it is an allegory would be superfluous.

With Slifkin’s three objections to my explanation of Rashi having being shown to be invalid, the explanation stands as a clearly viable way of explaining Rashi’s explicit comments about allegory in some *pesukim* but not in others, that does not involve corporealism whatsoever, and so Slifkin’s *argumentum ex silentio* is completely negated.

In addition to all of the above, it should be noted that Slifkin’s premise throughout much of his *argumentum ex silentio* is as follows: Rashi’s anthropomorphic usage without his actually stating that it is allegorical points to the fact that the anthropomorphisms are indeed literal. A counter-example would falsify this premise. That is, if we were to find an instance where Rashi speaks anthropomorphically without stating that he is doing so as an allegory – and yet it can be shown that Rashi clearly meant it as an allegory – that would undermine Slifkin’s premise. With that in mind, see Rashi’s comments on *Shemos* 15:12, where, explaining the meaning of *natisa yeminnekha tivla’eimo aretz*, he states that God holds all in His hand, and when He extends His hand the wicked fall, just like a person who holds glass vessels in his hand, when he extends his hand a bit, the vessels fall and break. Nowhere does Rashi state that this is an allegory; yet it is patently clear that it must be an allegory. It is obvious that there is no literal, physical “great hand” holding up people above the ground such that if the hand were to tilt, the wicked would fall from it¹²⁹ and break upon impact when hitting the ground below. We thus have an example of Rashi using anthropomorphic terms explaining the Torah’s anthropomorphism, without stating that they are allegorical, yet he did not mean them to be understood literally. In this context it is important to note that elsewhere Rashi does **explicitly** state that a standard feature utilized in the *pesukim* of *Tanakh* is anthropomorphic **allegory**, in order to help man relate more easily to the idea being taught.¹³⁰ With its underlying premise shown to be incorrect, Slifkin’s argument here has no basis.

PAGES 72-73 – Slifkin’s Argument Concerning Onkelos’ Euphemisms

¹²⁹ Leaving aside the difficulty of how it is that only the wicked would fall as a result of the tilting of the hand, but the righteous would remain in place.

¹³⁰ See Rashi’s comments on *Shemos* 19:18, “[He] gives people [language] that is recognizable to them...we compare Him to His creatures in order to make it clear...”

The Torah speaks of “*HaShem* covering Moshe with His hand [to protect him],” and Onkelos translated this phrase as “*HaShem* shielded Moshe with His word.” Rashi points out that Onkelos is employing a *kinnui* out of honor for God, which I explained to mean that “since God is omnipotent, there was no need for Him to cover Moshe with an actual hand in order to protect him as a literal reading of the *pasuk* would imply, and therefore the Torah is not describing a literal occurrence, but rather is presenting a metaphor. However, since the limitation that is implied by the imagery of anthropomorphisms can be taken to be disrespectful when speaking of the unlimited Supreme Being, Onkelos adjusted the metaphor of the biblical verse to negate the connotation of any such limitation, and this is by way of honor for God.”¹³¹ Slifkin objected, stating that if my explanation is correct, then Onkelos is not employing a *kinnui*; he is instead giving a literal account of what happened. Since we know that Rashi held Onkelos to be using a *kinnui*, my explanation is therefore untenable.¹³² This objection is based upon two premises: [1] the term *kinnui* is a relative term, that is, it is a euphemism **for something**, and [2] the relative of the *kinnui* (what the euphemism is for) is not the *pasuk*; rather, the relative of the *kinnui* is the true event that happened at Sinai.¹³³ The first premise is, of course, correct. The second premise is false. Onkelos’ *kinnui* is relative to the *pasuk*, not to the true event that happened at Sinai. The Torah employed a metaphor in its account of the true event that happened at Sinai; Onkelos employed a *kinnui* for the metaphor, because the metaphor implies a limitation to God. Slifkin’s objection is groundless, as there is no reason to say that the *kinnui* must be relative to the true event; on the contrary, as a translation of the text of the Torah, the *kinnui* is relative to the text that is being translated.

PAGES 73-74 – Slifkin’s Argument Concerning God’s “Descent” and His “Passing Over”

In my article, I claimed that with regard to *HaShem*’s “descent” to *Bavel*, Rashi’s comment, adapted from the *Midrash Tanchuma*, of “*lo hutzrakh le-kakh ela ba le-lamed...*” means “there was no need for this, i.e., for the verse, to employ the metaphor of God’s descent to *Bavel* (after all, in many instances of God’s ‘awareness’ the Torah does not employ such a

¹³¹ Zucker, pp. 25-26.

¹³² Slifkin (2010), p. 72.

¹³³ Slifkin expressed this notion by claiming (p. 72) that the idea of a *kinnui* is something “**further** from the real description than the word in the verse; if Onkelos was using a word that was **closer** to the reality, it would not be described as a *kinnuy...*” (emphasis his). This definition of *kinnui* as being **further from the reality**, rather than being **further from the verse**, is baseless and arbitrary.

metaphor); rather, it, i.e., the verse, comes to teach...”¹³⁴ Slifkin objected, stating that my explanation “requires inserting words that are not there.”¹³⁵ This objection is difficult to understand since my explanation does not insert one extra word at all – it merely defines what Rashi’s pronoun “this”¹³⁶ refers to. Further, according to my explanation, Rashi’s syntax makes perfect sense, since he employs two verbs in the same phrase with no subject, and I proved that the unspoken subject of the second verb, *ba le-lamed*, must be the verse, not God;¹³⁷ therefore, the subject of the first verb, *lo hutzrakh*, must also be the verse. According to Slifkin’s interpretation, the first verb, *lo hutzrakh*, refers to God [– He had no need to actually descend], and the second verb, *ba le-lamed*, refers to the verse [– it comes to teach us]. This is grammatically untenable since the two verbs appear together with no explicit subject, so that one subject applies to both verbs. In an attempt to deal with this problem, Slifkin suggested that perhaps the meaning is “it was not necessary for the verse to relate [that God descended]...[rather, it comes to teach us...]”¹³⁸ Slifkin is claiming here that according to Rashi, God actually descended to *Bavel*, but it was not necessary for the Torah to tell us this. This defies any understanding – God did something as part of the story of *Bavel* and it is not necessary for the Torah to tell us? Why not? If Slifkin’s understanding is correct, then it is never necessary for the Torah to tell us anything that God did as part of His interactions with humanity!

Slifkin did not respond at all to my observation that Rashi did not originate this entire sentence; he took it from the *Midrash Tanchuma*. The known incorporealist *rishonim* also accepted the *Midrash Tanchuma*, and must have learned this passage as being allegorical. Therefore, to claim that Rashi’s citation of the passage in and of itself demonstrates his acceptance of corporealism is clearly not evidentiary at all.¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Zucker, p. 27.

¹³⁵ Slifkin (2010), p. 73.

¹³⁶ “There was no need for this...”

¹³⁷ Slifkin admitted that this is correct. See Slifkin (2010), p. 73, footnote 54.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ The original source from which Rashi adapted his comment here is *Midrash Tanchuma, Noah*, section 18. The *midrash* there refers to God as the subject of both parts of its statement; “Did [God] need to descend and see? Is not all seen and revealed before Him?...Rather, [He did so] to teach people not to complete [their] judgement...” It is therefore significant to note that Rashi changed the *midrash*’s formulation to a term which Rashi always uses elsewhere to refer to the text, not to God. There is one variant manuscript of Rashi, published in *Mikraos Gedolos HaKeter*, which parallels the formulation of the *midrash* exactly. In order for Slifkin to use this as a support for his claim, then, he would need to maintain that the *Midrash Tanchuma* is expressing a corporealist view. Note that this

With regard to *HaShem's* “passing over” the houses of the Egyptians, Slifkin claims that Rashi’s translating the word *pasach* as “passing over” indicates his corporealism, despite the fact that known incorporealist *rishonim* also translated the word in the same way, because we have here “yet another case where Rashi was not at all bothered by the corporeal meaning of the word, despite the fact that he explains other types of anthropomorphisms non-literally...”¹⁴⁰ This is nothing more than a reiteration of Slifkin’s *argumentum ex silentio*, an argument that has already been negated.¹⁴¹

PAGES 74-75 – Slifkin’s Argument Concerning “The Hanging Corpse”

In response to my having cited R. Yesha’yah de Trani and R. Yehoshu’a ibn Shu’ib, two *rishonim* who explicitly states that Rashi’s explanation of *deyukan* is not literal with regard to God,¹⁴² Slifkin claims that R. Yesha’yah’s and R. Yehoshu’a’s statements are contrived.¹⁴³ I assume he would say the same of Ramban, a known incorporealist, who favorably cited Rashi’s explanation of *deyukan* and therefore must have understood it allegorically.¹⁴⁴ I have already demonstrated¹⁴⁵ that the term *deyukan* as applied to God was accepted and understood by incorporealists to be allegorical, and that they often did not comment explicitly that the term is allegorical. Rashi, an incorporealist, was no different from these many other incorporealist *rishonim*. Therefore, Slifkin’s objection here is without merit. Further, in an attempt to discredit R. Yesha’yah’s explanation, Slifkin claimed that Rashi “never invokes the mechanism of God sending righteous men a vision of an anthropoid entity.”¹⁴⁶ This claim is false, as Rashi, in his

is the same *Midrash Tanchuma* that defines the term “And God created the man in His *tzelem...*” as “in the *kavod* of his Creator...” (*Midrash Tanchuma, Pekudei*, section 2), and explains its meaning as “that man should be *chai ve-kayam...*” (*Midrash Tanchuma, Shelach*, section 2). Moreover, R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, a known, staunch incorporealist, in his comment on God’s “descent” to Bavel, writes that the Torah here is employing a metaphor, since “He sees and investigates and views everything **from His abode.**” (Emphasis added). Thus, even if Rashi meant that there is no need for God to have descended to Bavel since He can see from His abode in the heavens, as Slifkin originally claimed, it is clearly not evidence that Rashi thought God to be corporeal, because R. Yosef Bekhor Shor learned the verse in exactly that manner, and he certainly did not think God to be corporeal whatsoever.

¹⁴⁰ Slifkin (2010), p. 74.

¹⁴¹ See Zucker, pp. 19-23, and above pp. 21-24.

¹⁴² Zucker, p. 29.

¹⁴³ Slifkin (2010), pp. 74-75.

¹⁴⁴ See above p. 22.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Slifkin (2010), p. 74, footnote 55.

commentary on *Shir HaShirim* 5:16 states, “when He was seen at Sinai, He was seen as an elder...when He was seen on the sea, He was seen as a young man...”¹⁴⁷

Slifkin further objected to R. Yesha’yah’s and R. Yehoshu’a’s explanation of Rashi’s comment regarding *deyukan* by stating that since their explanations are not in agreement with each other, both must have been “inserting their own views into Rashi, not drawing Rashi’s views out of his words.”¹⁴⁸ By this logic, every *machlokes* in the Talmud, where *amora’im* argue about the meaning of a *tanna’s* statement, must be a case of the *amora’im* inserting their views into the *tanna*, not drawing the *tanna’s* views out of his words. This is, of course, untrue.

PAGES 75-76 – Slifkin’s Argument Concerning “The Decomposing Face”

With regard to the *halakhah* that a mourner must overturn his bed, the Talmud states, “God gave men His *demus deyukan* and they overturned it with their sins.”¹⁴⁹ I had claimed that from an incorporealist’s perspective, the Talmud is teaching that there is a concrete action (the overturning of the bed) that is mandated to reflect an abstract idea (that in death, which comes about through sin, man has overturned his *tzelem Elokim*). The concrete action is a metaphor for the abstract concept. In order for that to be true, there must be a relationship between “turning over the bed” and “turning over the *tzelem Elokim*.”¹⁵⁰ But what does it mean altogether that the *tzelem Elokim* is “turned over,” such that turning over the bed will be an apt metaphor? Addressing this very issue,¹⁵¹ Rashi, in his commentary on *Mo’ed Katan* 15b, states, “In their sins they overturned [the *demus deyukni*] – since in a dead person, his face is overturned and changes...” Rashi explains that there is a “physical aspect” to the overturning of the soul, via the physical overturning of the face,¹⁵² such that the physical overturning of the bed will be an appropriate metaphor. Without the “link” that Rashi provides, there is a problem in the

¹⁴⁷ If Slifkin were to respond to this by claiming that God was seen not in a vision, but literally – a claim that has no more weight than to say he was seen in a vision, which is the understanding presented by many *rishonim* regarding the *Mekhilta* which was Rashi’s source – then Slifkin would be contradicting his own entire theory. He maintains that according to Rashi, God has a fixed physical form. If so, what does Rashi mean that God was seen as an elder and as a young man? God has a specific form – He is seen as His specific form is! Moreover, if this claim of literalism were correct, Rashi should not say “when He was seen at Sinai, He was seen as an elder...;” rather, he should say “when He **came** to Sinai, He **was** an elder...”

¹⁴⁸ Slifkin (2010), p. 75.

¹⁴⁹ *Mo’ed Katan* 15a-15b.

¹⁵⁰ See Zucker pp. 30-31.

¹⁵¹ Notice the *dibbur ha-maschil* that Rashi is explaining.

¹⁵² Which “houses” the *tzelem Elokim*.

relationship between the overturning of the bed and the overturning of the *tzelem Elokim*, since one is physical and the other would be figurative. Rashi maintained that in order to have an appropriate metaphor, a “figurative” relationship is insufficient. With this explanation, Slifkin’s response – wherein he stated that for an incorporealist “no link is needed”¹⁵³ – is negated, and thus, his claim about Rashi’s commentary on *Mo’ed Katan* is not at all evidentiary.

PAGE 76 – Slifkin’s Argument Concerning “God’s Eyes”

Slifkin had claimed in his original article that Rashi’s commentary – that only a person with vision in both eyes is obligated “to be seen” at the festival pilgrimage, just as God sees with two eyes – shows Rashi to be a corporealist.¹⁵⁴ I pointed out that R. Meir Abulafia explains the Talmudic passage that “just as God sees with two eyes...” in an allegorical way,¹⁵⁵ and that Rashi can easily be understood in the same manner, since he stated, “Just as He sees you, as He is complete, for it is stated, ‘The eyes (in the plural) of God...’.”¹⁵⁶ Slifkin objected to that, stating that Rashi elsewhere said, “Just as the Holy One blessed be He comes to see you and He is complete in His two eyes...,”¹⁵⁷ implying that “God is complete **in that** He has two eyes.”¹⁵⁸ Let us see if the implication that Slifkin inferred from Rashi here is correct. The Talmud¹⁵⁹ had taught that someone blind in one eye is exempt from the festival pilgrimage, and this is derived, according to Rashi, from an analogy to God. What is the analogy? It could not possibly be that “just as God has two eyes, so too must the pilgrim have two eyes,” since most people who are blind in one eye actually do have two eyes. Rather, the analogy is that “just as God has vision in two eyes, so too must the pilgrim have vision in two eyes.” Therefore, the comment of Rashi that Slifkin quoted in an attempt to refute my claim, “Just as the Holy One blessed be He comes to see you and He is **complete in His two eyes...**” does not mean that He is complete **in that** He has two eyes; rather, it means that He is **complete in his vision in both eyes**. This meaning is absolutely consistent with R. Meir Abulafia’s allegorical explanation, and therefore Slifkin’s claim about God’s eyes in general, as a proof for Rashi’s corporealism, is not at all evidentiary.

¹⁵³ Slifkin (2010). P. 75.

¹⁵⁴ Slifkin (2009), pp. 100-101.

¹⁵⁵ “The One Who sees with two eyes, meaning, with complete vision...” See Zucker, p. 31.

¹⁵⁶ See Rashi’s commentary on *Sanhedrin* 4b.

¹⁵⁷ See Rashi’s commentary on *Arakhin* 2b.

¹⁵⁸ Slifkin (2010), p. 76, emphasis in the original.

¹⁵⁹ *Sanhedrin* 4b, *Arakhin* 2b.

PAGE 77 – Slifkin’s Argument Concerning “The Image of God”

Finally, Slifkin mentions my citation of Rashi’s comments on *Bereishis* 1:26, stating, “Zucker claims that Rashi’s explanation of man being created in God’s image is with regard to ‘understanding and wisdom’...**but this is incorrect.** Rashi’s comments to that verse only give us his explanation of *demus*, not *tzelem*.”¹⁶⁰ What does Slifkin mean when he claims that my citation is incorrect? The *pasuk* upon which Rashi is commenting states, “*Va-yomer Elokim na’aseh adam be-tzalmeinu kidmuseinu...*” Rashi explains that *kidmuseinu* means “understanding and wisdom.” He **also** explains, in his comments on this *pasuk* and the next one, that *be-tzalmeinu* means “in the mold that God made, in the form that is *deyukan yotzro*.” What does Rashi mean when he says *deyukan*? Slifkin claims that he means literally a physical form, since elsewhere, in numerous instances, Rashi uses the term in a literal physical sense. But then the same argument can be made about Ramban, who also uses the word *deyukan* in numerous places to mean a literal physical form.¹⁶¹ Now clearly, that same Ramban, who himself cites Rashi’s statement about man being in the *deyukan* of his Creator,¹⁶² cannot possibly mean it as a literal physical form, since he was a known incorporealist.¹⁶³ Therefore, to present the same argument with regard to Rashi and conclude on that basis that he must have been a corporealist is specious. As noted earlier,¹⁶⁴ the *rishonim* R. Yesha’yah de Trani and R. Yehoshu’a ibn Shu’ib explained **how** Rashi’s use of the term *deyukan* with regard to God does not refer to a literal physical form; however, those explanations did not accord with Slifkin’s view and he dismissed them as “contrived.”

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Slifkin’s response to the evidence of Rashi’s incorporealism from Rashi’s comments on *Yeshayahu* were based upon the idea that Rashi views God as spatially outside of the seven firmaments, an idea whose sole support is that Rashi mentions “above and below” in the same sentence as “in front and behind” so that they must be dealing with the same framework. This

¹⁶⁰ Slifkin (2010), p. 77, emphasis added.

¹⁶¹ See, for example Ramban on *Shemos* 28:2, *VaYikra* 19:4, *Devarim* 34:12.

¹⁶² See Ramban on *Devarim* 21:22.

¹⁶³ And yet, Ramban, who clearly understood the term allegorically, (in Slifkin’s language (p. 77), “using some novel understanding”), did not specify at all that he was doing so, as Slifkin said that we would “surely” expect him to do.

¹⁶⁴ See Zucker, pp. 29-30.

claim was negated by the demonstration that Rashi elsewhere defines “above and below” as *Ma’aseh Merkavah*, and “in front and behind” as *Ma’aseh Bereishis*, two very different frameworks. What remains of Slifkin’s objection to the evidence is that the testimony in *Yeshayahu* was limited to the pantheon of gods at the time, a claim that I had already refuted and to which Slifkin did not respond.

Slifkin’s response to the evidence from Rashi’s comments on God’s “right and left” was an improbable reading of Rashi’s comments, where the meaning of Rashi’s question was “Does God have a ‘right’ **and** a ‘left’? No, He has only a ‘right’.” Alternatively, Slifkin suggested that the “correct” version of Rashi may lie not in the more accurate manuscripts, but rather in the “greatly inferior” Bomberg edition. In fact, at the conclusion of his article Slifkin admits that the evidence from Rashi’s comments on God’s “right and left” is “potentially powerful.”¹⁶⁵

Slifkin’s response to the evidence from Rashi’s comments on God “walking” was to claim that I wrongly inserted a word in the translation. However, I have demonstrated that this word, “[therefore],” absolutely belongs in the translation based upon the flow of the Talmudic discussion, connecting the Talmud’s answer to its question. Alternatively, Slifkin suggests that Rashi’s *kushya*, (how can the Torah suggest that God literally walks with the people?), means that God is too large to walk with them. This, while God is small enough to cover Moshe at Sinai, and small enough to pass over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt.

Slifkin’s response to the evidence from the perception of Rashi among the *rishonim* was to claim that there were numerous incorporealist *rishonim* who cited corporealists favorably.¹⁶⁶ This was shown to be factually inaccurate. Slifkin then claimed that R. Ya’akov ben Shimshon, a student of Rashi, was a corporealist, based upon his commentary on *Avos*. In this, Slifkin was relying on R. Moshe Taku’s interpretation of R. Ya’akov’s commentary, not on the commentary of R. Ya’akov himself. The critical edition of R. Ya’akov’s work, recently published, shows that Slifkin’s claim was based upon false information. Finally, Slifkin claimed to know Rashi’s true view better than the *rishonim* who said otherwise because it takes a focused effort and no preconceived bias to determine Rashi’s true view. This, despite the fact that Slifkin claimed that

¹⁶⁵ Slifkin (2010), p. 77.

¹⁶⁶ So that in doing so in Rashi’s case, R. Avraham ben HaRambam et al were simply following a general pattern among the *rishonim*.

Rashi revealed his view explicitly at the beginning of his commentary on *Bereishis* (1:27), and despite the fact that R. Moshe Taku, who was looking for support among the *rishonim* for corporealism, could cite only Rashi's student¹⁶⁷ and not Rashi himself.¹⁶⁸

Slifkin's response to my objection regarding the alleged corporealism of the rabbinic elite in medieval France was to cite sources that point to corporealism among the laity; this is, of course, irrelevant to his argument. There were only three known corporealist rabbinic elite in France, none of whom was born until well after Rashi died – to which Slifkin responded, well, there must have been more during Rashi's time. To bolster his position about the rabbinic elite, Slifkin cited HaMe'ili whose words explicitly speak of the laity and **not** the rabbinic elite. Further, as I had argued earlier, of the three known corporealist rabbinic elite, **not one** espoused the type of corporealism that Slifkin would have us believe Rashi maintained. Slifkin did not respond to this point at all.

Slifkin's response to my objection regarding his *argumentum ex silentio* was to ask that if Rashi was an incorporealist, why did he not state so explicitly. I provided an answer to this good question. Slifkin objected to my proposed theory about Rashi's selective comments of non-literalism by claiming that God's "anger" at the sea was not a weakness, but a display of power. This was an elementary mistake in logic on Slifkin's part – confusing a cause and an effect.

Slifkin's response to my objection regarding Onkelos' *kinnuy* was to claim, arbitrarily and without basis, that a *kinnuy* must be further from the event being depicted, not further from the *pasuk* that it is explaining.

Slifkin's response to my objection regarding God's "descent" and His "passing over" was to claim that Rashi used two verbs with no stated subject, but that each verb has a different (unspoken) subject related to it. This is, of course, grammatically very difficult and awkward. Alternatively, Slifkin suggested that Rashi was saying that despite the fact that God did something in the account of the tower of *Bavel*, there was no need for the Torah to tell us what

¹⁶⁷ Based upon his own interpretation of the student's words, not the words themselves.

¹⁶⁸ In the conclusion to his article Slifkin (p. 79) states, "if a corporealist such as R. Moshe Taku were commenting on these verses and Talmudic statements, we would expect him to say exactly what Rashi says." And yet, R. Moshe Taku could not cite Rashi once in support of his own corporealism! Further on Slifkin's comment here, why go to what we would "**expect**" R. Moshe Taku to say in accordance with Rashi's comments? Ramban, a **known incorporealist**, **did** say many of the things that Rashi said, almost exactly as Rashi said them – so how could those words of Rashi and Ramban be "evidence" for Rashi's corporealism?

He did. But why is there no need for the Torah to tell us this part of the story? It is, after all, part of the story! Further, Slifkin did not respond at all to my earlier objection that Rashi's source, *Midrash Tanchuma*, was used as well by known incorporealists, who had no problem with its message here.¹⁶⁹

Slifkin's response to my objection regarding Rashi's comments on the "hanging corpses" was to claim that Rashi's use of *deyukan* showed that he was a corporealist. Yet, as I had argued earlier, Ramban, a known incorporealist, used the same word in the same way without any problem, so this could not possibly be evidence for Rashi's corporealism. Slifkin did not respond to this point at all.

Slifkin's response to my objection regarding Rashi's comment on the decomposing face was to claim that an incorporealist would not use a "link" between the action of the overturned bed and the phenomenon of the overturned soul. This is not true, as a link is necessary to relate the metaphor in a direct way to that which it represents.

Finally, Slifkin's response to my objection regarding Rashi's comment on God's "eyes" was to claim that Rashi meant that God is perfect in that He has two eyes. This meaning is not possible within the context of the Talmudic passage.

With all of Slifkin's objections and responses shown to be incorrect, untenable, or based upon misunderstandings of Talmudic passages, the objections to Slifkin's theory remain in force, and the evidence for Rashi's incorporealism remains steadfast. And so, I reiterate, No – Rashi was not a corporealist.

POSTSCRIPT

After seeing an earlier version of this essay, Slifkin posted a "Closing Statement"¹⁷⁰ wherein he says that he will not be responding to the points of this essay, in part because "the one who has the last word, and effectively 'wins,' is the one who has more time, obstinacy and sticking power. Zucker would constantly respond..." He then proceeds to attack me as being biased.¹⁷¹ In fact, Slifkin had proclaimed my *Hakirah* article to be "utterly worthless,"¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ See, as well, footnote 137 above.

¹⁷⁰ See www.zootorah.com/ZuckerClosingStatement.pdf.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

“ridiculous,”¹⁷³ and “entirely without merit,”¹⁷⁴ and he proclaimed this essay to be “almost totally lack[ing in] substance,”¹⁷⁵ containing “strained and unreasonable arguments.”¹⁷⁶ It is therefore interesting to note that on August 12, 2010 both Slifkin and I received an e-mail from Yehoshua Grosser who had written to Professor Marc Shapiro, someone Slifkin has written about with respect and admiration; Grosser had asked Shapiro for his opinion about the issue of Rashi’s (in)corporealism, and he forwarded Shapiro’s written response wherein the latter said that he found himself being pulled in each direction after reading Slifkin’s two essays and my two essays.

¹⁷² See www.rationalistjudaism.com, “One Man’s Maverick is Another Man’s Bore,” November 16, 2009, comments of 9:08 pm.

¹⁷³ Ibid, November 17, 2009, comments of 6:25 am.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, comments of 9:52 am.

¹⁷⁵ See www.rationalistjudaism.com, “They Could Say It, We Cannot,” August 8, 2010, comments of 11:04 pm.

¹⁷⁶ See www.zootorah.com/ZuckerClosingStatement.pdf.