

Messianic Wonders and Skeptical Rationalists

By: NATAN SLIFKIN

Three Who Expounded Upon Messianic Wonders

The vast differences between the traditionalist¹ and rationalist² schools of thought within Judaism—and their centuries-old traditions of textual interpretation—are rarely appreciated, much less subjected to careful analysis. The enormity of these differences, and yet their prominent pedigrees, comes to light in their approach to several passages from the Talmud and Midrash which deal with the topic of rationalism itself. This subject is discussed in the context of wonders that are stated to occur in the Messianic Era.

One account in the Talmud describes a student of Rabbi Yochanan who is apparently berated for taking a rationalist approach:

“And I will make your windows of rubies, and your gates of beryl, and all your borders of precious stones” (Isaiah 54:12) – It is as Rabbi Yochanan sat

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- ¹ I do not use this term to mean those who follow traditional approaches, since, contrary to popular belief, the traditional approaches (at least in the early medieval period) have largely been rationalist. Instead, I define it here as the belief that the Sages’ knowledge derived from divine revelation transmitted by tradition, and use it primarily in contrast to rationalism (see following note).
- ² I do not use this term according to its strict philosophical definition, following which it devalues knowledge derived via empirical means. Instead, I define it as the position that knowledge is legitimately obtained through our own reasoning and senses, that one should endeavor not to posit changes in the natural order, and that one should be skeptical of extraordinary claims that lack reasonable evidence.

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and expounded, “The Holy One is destined to bring precious stones and pearls that are thirty by thirty (cubits) and hollow out of them an area ten by twenty and stand them at the gates of Jerusalem.” A certain student scoffed at him: “Now that we do not even find such things in the size of a small dove’s egg, can ones of such size be found?!” After some time, he set out to sea in a ship, and saw ministering angels that were sitting and carving precious stones and pearls that were thirty by thirty and hollowing out ten by twenty. He said to them, “Who are these for?” They said to him, “The Holy One is destined to stand them at the gates of Jerusalem.” He came before Rabbi Yochanan and said to him, “Expound, my rebbe, it is fitting for you to expound; just as you said, thus I saw.” Rabbi Yochanan replied: “Empty one! If you hadn’t seen it, then would you not have believed it?! You are a scoffer at the words of the sages!” He gave him a look and he became a heap of bones. (Talmud, *Bava Basra* 75a)

Elsewhere in the Talmud, Rabbi Zeira presents this story as an example of how Rabbi Yochanan would define an *apikores*.³ At first glance, this account seems to unequivocally condemn rationalism. Indeed, as we shall see, many invoke it for just this purpose.

But matters are not so simple. In another account, concerning a student of Rabban Gamliel, the rationalist student is likewise deemed incorrect, but instead of being castigated, he is re-educated:

Rabban Gamliel sat and expounded: [In the Messianic Era] women are destined to give birth every day,⁴ as it states, “Pregnant and bearing young together” (Jer. 31:7). A certain student mocked him, saying, “There is nothing new under the sun!” Rabban Gamliel said to him, Come and I will show you an example in this world, and he went and showed him a chicken.

...Rabban Gamliel further sat and expounded: [In the Messianic Era] the Land of Israel is destined to grow fresh bread and garments of fine wool, as it states, “May there be an abundance of grain in the land” (Ps. 72:16).⁵ A certain student mocked him, say-

³ *Sanhedrin* 100a.

⁴ Rashi explains that this does not mean that a child is conceived and born on the same day, but rather that women will conceive multiple times in succession, such that when the pregnancies reach their term, the woman ends up giving birth on successive days. See Maharsha.

⁵ See Rashi for an explanation of how Rabban Gamliel derives this from the verse.

ing. “There is nothing new under the sun!” Rabban Gamliel said to him, Come and I will show you an example in this world, and he went and showed him mushrooms and truffles (as an example of instant bread-like food); and regarding the garments of fine wool, he showed him the fibrous growth around young palm-shoots. (Talmud, *Shabbos* 30b)

Finally, in a little-known third account, the rationalist approach is neither condemned nor corrected, but rather presented as the appropriately skeptical response to unrealistic predictions of Messianic wonders:

Rabbi Meir sat and expounded: The wolf is destined (in the Messianic Era) to have a fleece of fine wool, and the dog will have the coat of ermine (to make clothing for the righteous). They said to him, “Enough, Rabbi Meir! There is nothing new under the sun.” (*Midrash Kobeles Rabbah* 1:28)

This last account is especially odd since the Messianic wonders described by Rabbi Meir are far more plausible than those described by Rabbi Yochanan and Rabban Gamliel; wolves in northern countries actually do grow a thick undercoat of soft fur during the winter. Yet while the Talmud presents the predictions of Rabbi Yochanan and Rabban Gamliel as being correct, the prediction of Rabbi Meir is unilaterally dismissed by the other rabbis.

Clearly, these accounts require much explanation. We will first make some initial observations regarding Rabbi Yochanan’s case, then explore it in detail, and finally examine all three cases together.

Rabbi Yochanan and his Student

The story of Rabbi Yochanan and his student is challenging. Some perplexed commentators admit that they cannot satisfactorily account for the student’s crime:

Could it be that this student, who questioned it in his heart, should be rated as a heretic? And afterwards, when he saw the ministering angels, he intended to proclaim the greatness of Rabbi Yochanan’s words, not to challenge him, Heaven forbid. Why was he turned into a heap of bones? The bottom line is that the explanation of this passage eludes me. And that which is beyond you, do not expound upon. (Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi Epstein, *Minchas Yehudah* [Warsaw 1877], to *Bava Basra* 75b)

Later, we shall explore whether Rabbi Yochanan was speaking literally or metaphorically in his reference to giant gemstones and pearls. For now, let us assume that he was speaking literally. Before analyzing the nature of the student's crime, a few other questions require our attention.

One issue to clarify is whether Rabbi Yochanan predicted God supernaturally creating these stones, or using gemstones and pearls that already exist in nature. While not unequivocal, the text seems to favor the latter: Rabbi Yochanan speaks of God "bringing" these gemstones, not "creating" them. Additionally, the angels were already carving the stones when the student saw them (although the meaning of that statement itself requires elucidation). It therefore seems that Rabbi Yochanan was referring to giant gemstones that occur naturally, and giant pearls from naturally existing giant oysters.⁶

A second question is the source of Rabbi Yochanan's exegesis. Was he expounding based on a tradition, or based on his interpretation of the verse? Rambam was apparently of the view that all such eschatological predictions were based on the Sages' own interpretations of verses.⁷ Rashbam,⁸ Maharsha⁹ and Ben Yehoyada¹⁰ present different approaches as to how Rabbi Yochanan derived his prediction from nuances in the wording of the verse. On the other hand, Ran, as we shall see, apparently understands it to have been a tradition.

The third issue to clarify is whether Rabbi Yochanan heard the student's initial denial. While, as we shall see, some claim that he did, others assert the opposite, deriving this from Rabbi Yochanan's statement, "If you wouldn't have seen it, then would you not have

⁶ An opposing claim could perhaps be made on the grounds that Rabbi Yochanan, as we shall later see, specifically spoke about supernatural wonders in the Messianic Era.

⁷ "Regarding all these and suchlike matters—nobody knows how they will be, to the extent that they were concealed from the prophets, and even the Sages have no tradition in these matters, resorting instead to weighing up the verses, and therefore there are disputes in these matters" (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Melachim* 12:4).

⁸ In *Ein Yaakov* to *Bava Basra* 75a.

⁹ To *Bava Basra* 75a.

¹⁰ To *Sanhedrin* 100a.

believed it?!”¹¹ Furthermore, had Rabbi Yochanan heard his initial statement, he would presumably have “given him a look” immediately. But we need not posit that the student’s disbelief was a private thought, as the aforementioned Rabbi Epstein does; perhaps even if Rabbi Yochanan did not hear him, others did.

The Obligation to Believe the Sages

In the fifteenth century, Rabbi Yitzchak Abouhav used the story of Rabbi Yochanan to prove that one must believe every single statement made by the Sages:

We are obligated to believe everything that they, of blessed memory, said of the *midrashos* and the *haggados*, just as with our belief in the Torah of Moshe Rabbeinu. If we find something that appears to be an exaggeration or scientifically impossible, we must attribute the deficiency [in comprehension] to our grasp, not to their statement. Someone who derides anything that they said is punished. (Rabbi Yitzchak Abouhav, *Menoras HaMaor*, 2:1:2:2¹²)

In the previous century, Ran (Rabbi Nissim ben Reuven of Gerona) cited this story for a seemingly similar purpose as Rabbi Yitzchak Abouhav:

And just as we are commanded to follow their consensus in the laws of the Torah, we are also commanded to follow everything that they say to us by way of tradition with opinions (*deyos*) and elucidations of verses, whether or not the saying is with regard to a commandment. (here Ran cites the story of Rabbi Yochanan and his student) ...Behold, that which Rabbi Yochanan said here was not a law or ordinance from the laws of the Torah, and nevertheless it arises here that the student was saying words of heresy, that he scorns the word of God, in that he does not believe the one whom he is commanded to believe. (Rabbi Nissim ben Reuven, *Derashos HaRan* 5)

Although this is sometimes invoked in support of the principle that one must unquestioningly believe everything in the Talmud, a

¹¹ Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi Epstein, *Minchas Yehudah* ad loc.

¹² In his introduction, Rabbi Abouhav does acknowledge that Rav Sherira Gaon did not see Aggados as binding, but he claims that this was meant to be limited to certain categories of Aggada.

close reading reveals that Ran's position is more limited in scope. He states that there is an obligation to believe everything that the Sages say *with regard to Deyos and exegeses of Scripture* and which they say *al tzad hakabbalah*—from received tradition. These important qualifying phrases are often overlooked. (Note, too, that Ran elsewhere writes that we must follow the Sages in halachah *even when they are wrong*,¹³ which implies that when he writes that we are commanded to follow their consensus in the laws of the Torah, it does not mean that they must be right, merely that we must follow their view.¹⁴) Ran is acknowledging that some statements of the Sages concerning opinions and/or exegeses of Scripture were *not* said via Sinaitic tradition, and one is permitted to dispute them. Ran's citation of Rabbi Yochanan's student shows that he considered Rabbi Yochanan's statement to have been presented *al tzad hakabbalah*—from received tradition, in contradistinction to the views of Rambam, Rashbam, Maharsha and Ben Yehoyada.

It should be noted that the position of Rabbi Yitzchak Abouhav, and possibly that of Ran too, is highly innovative. The overwhelming majority of Geonim and Rishonim, (a) did not consider the Sages' scientific assessments to be inherently superior to others',¹⁵ and (b) rated Aggadic statements as non-binding.¹⁶

Still, the fact remains that according to both Rabbi Yitzchak Abouhav and Ran, exegeses such as those of Rabbi Yochanan must be accepted. However, it is not clear whether these authorities interpreted Rabbi Yochanan's prediction literally or non-literally. This difference, however, will be of critical importance.

¹³ See *Derush* 3, pages 86 and 112 in the Feldman edition.

¹⁴ For an important discussion of how our allegiance to the authority of the Sages does not presume their infallibility in halachah, see Rabbi Shlomo Fisher, *Derashos Beis Yisbai* 15.

¹⁵ See <<http://torahandscience.blogspot.com>> for an extensive list of sources and full citations.

¹⁶ See Rabbi Chaim Eisen, "Maharal's *Be'er ha-Golah* and His Revolution in Aggadic Scholarship—in Their Context and on His Terms," *Hakirah* vol. 4, for an extensive list of sources.

The Traditionalist Approach

Several respected authorities understand the account concerning Rabbi Yochanan's student literally: Rabbi Yochanan in fact spoke of actual gemstones and pearls that measure fifty feet in size. Maharsha states that his student's crime lay in denying the literal truth of his prediction: "it is the way of heretics to remove words from their literal meaning."¹⁷ Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe even writes that one does not have the right to adopt a non-literal interpretation of Rabbi Yochanan's words:

There is no basis whatsoever to interpret this passage in a non-literal manner, for neither Maharsha nor Maharal strayed from the simple meaning of the matter, and we live from their mouths in how we explain Aggadata. (*Alei Shur* vol. II, p. 294)¹⁸

The traditionalist school interprets Rabban Gamliel's expositions regarding the Land of Israel growing bread and garments of fine wool in a similar manner: Rabbi Yekusiel Aryeh Kamelhar even brings present-day examples to support a literal understanding.¹⁹ The breadfruit tree (*Artocarpus altilis*), as its name suggests, produces a large fruit which, when cooked, has a taste similar to fresh baked bread. (Rabbi Kamelhar claims that these trees from Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands were known to Rabban Gamliel, but he opted instead to tell his student about phenomena that were accessible to be verified.) Regarding the garments of fine wool, Rabbi Kamelhar mentions the paper mulberry tree (*Broussonetia papyrifera*), in which the inner bark can be cleaned and beaten to produce a non-woven fabric known as Polynesian Tapa cloth.

Tosafos uses the story of Rabbi Yochanan's student to show that seeking empirical confirmation for a statement of the Sages is forbidden.²⁰ Rabbi Zvi Elimelech Shapiro of Dynov (1783-1841) invokes it

¹⁷ Maharsha to *Sanbedrin* 100a, a.v. *Nachal miBeis Kadsbei haKadashim*.

¹⁸ I find this statement greatly perplexing; as we shall see, many authorities interpret these passages non-literally, and, furthermore, it is unclear what exactly binds us to Maharal and Maharsha in Aggadic interpretation.

¹⁹ *HaTalmud U'Mada'ei HaTevel*, ch. 5, *Shaar Ha-Emunah*, pp. 95-96.

²⁰ *Tosafos* to *Chullin* 57b s.v. *Eizel v'achzi*. He raises this point to query the Talmud's account of how Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta performed an

to demonstrate the evils of rationalism and empiricism.²¹ He rejects the notion that rationalists such as Rav Saadiah Gaon and Rambam present a contradiction to his thesis, since, in his opinion, there were mystical reasons which made their writings necessary for their generations. Rabbi Mordechai Gifter of Telz presents the story of Rabbi Yochanan's student as a stern warning to those who might require empirical evidence to buttress their faith in the Sages' words:

He saw that the student believed his rebbe's words due to his sense of sight, from experiencing it. This is not only a lack of faith – there is ridicule of the words of the Sages. Faith does not require confirmation from the senses; it is self-justifying, in the depths of the heart's wisdom, whereas sensory confirmation brings the concept into the material world and removes it from Torah. (Rabbi Mordechai Gifter, *Pirkei Emunah: Shiurei Daas*, p. 98)

Rabbi Moshe Shapiro presents a more nuanced interpretation.²² He claims that Rabbi Yochanan heard the student's initial denial of his statement, but did not hold him accountable as a scoffer, since the student may have genuinely considered the existence of such gemstones and pearls to be utterly impossible, which would have been legitimate. In that case, however, when the student encountered the stones on his voyage, he should have refused to believe his eyes. But since he changed his mind because of the evidence in front of him, he obviously rated the physical evidence that he saw as more credible than Rabbi Yochanan's exegesis, which classifies him as a bona fide scoffer of the Sages' words:

...At first, when he ridiculed it, it was possible that his view was that such a thing is truly impossible to exist in this world. And for such an attitude, he does not yet become a scoffer on the words of the sages. But if he was truly secure in the view that such a phenomenon is impossible, then when he saw the angels he should

experiment to confirm a statement of King Solomon about ants. *Tosafos* answers that he was merely seeking to clarify *how* Solomon knew it, not *whether* Solomon knew it. However, Rabbi Yaakov Gesundheit, in *Tiferes Yaakov*, observes (in surprise) that Rashi states that Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta was in fact not willing to rely on Solomon's authority.

²¹ *B'nei Yissachar, ma'amarei Sivan, ma'amar* 5:19.

²² As recorded by Rabbi Reuven Shmeltzer in *Afikei Mayim, Shavuos*, pp. 15-16.

have concluded that in truth he did not see anything, and it was only a dream or illusion. Since after he saw it with his own eyes he concluded that such a thing is possible, then it turns out that in his view, that which he sees with his own eyes creates a strength of belief with a power that requires one to believe the fact of its existence more than that which the exegeses of Chazal require. (Rabbi Moshe Shapiro as cited by Reuven Shmeltzer, *Afikei Mayim* p. 16)²³

A problem with Rabbi Shapiro's approach is the student's initial rejection of Rabbi Yochanan's statement; it was not due to any philosophical conviction in the impossibility of large gemstones (itself difficult to justify), but rather for the empirical reason that all gemstones and pearls known to exist are vastly smaller. His subsequent reversal was due to new empirical evidence. If he is not accountable for rejecting Rabbi Yochanan's position due to empirical evidence, why would he be accountable for accepting it on those grounds?

In an apparent variation on this approach, Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz states the reason why the student was not initially accountable was that he simply could not visualize it. The problem is that when he *was* able to visualize it, he should have accepted that the veracity of the vision because Rabbi Yochanan had described it rather than because he himself had seen it:

In the beginning, Rabbi Yochanan did not punish him, for the student was not capable of believing in the possibility of gemstones measuring thirty by thirty, and it was for this reason that he did not believe it, but after he saw such things with his eyes, and then said, "Just as you said, thus I saw," he was now believing it on the grounds that he saw it... If the matter is entirely dependent upon his understanding and sensory perception, he is no servant at all, and that is heresy; he scorns the words of the Sages in and of themselves, and does not believe them unless he sees it with his

²³ Rabbi Shapiro concludes by citing Ramban's condemnation of the Greek materialists who deny the validity of everything that they cannot sense or explain. However, Ramban also relies upon Greek science to reject traditional understandings of the rainbow (see Gen. 9:12) and to present a viable alternative to the Sages' understanding of human conception (Lev. 12:2). In footnote 54 on p. 39 of *Afikei Mayim*, Rabbi Shapiro claims that Ramban in the latter discussion is referring to two different dimensions of Torah; many will find this explanation overly contrived.

own eyes. (Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz, *Sichos Mussar*, 5731, *ma'amar* 11: "The Servant of God")

Nevertheless, in contrast to the approach of Rabbi Moshe Shapiro and Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz, Rashi states that the student's heresy was in his initial skepticism.²⁴ As noted earlier, others point out that Rabbi Yochanan apparently did not originally hear the student's skepticism, deriving this from Rabbi Yochanan's statement, "If you wouldn't have seen it, then would you not have believed it?!" It was only later that Rabbi Yochanan was able to deduce that the student had originally been skeptical.

According to all these approaches, the account of Rabbi Yochanan's student is a powerful condemnation of rationalism. Even if a Sage's statements go against everything we know about the natural world, we may not reject them for empirical reasons. (It should be noted, though, that the student's position was not that he refused to accept *anything* unless he saw it with his own eyes; rather, he maintained that if he was told something that seemed extraordinarily unlikely, he would not accept it unless he saw it with his own eyes.)

All the above views, however, run counter to the many authorities who did not subscribe to the obligation that one must believe all the words of the Sages. As we noted earlier, many Geonim and Rishonim did not consider Aggadic statements or scientific assessments as binding. Furthermore, as we shall later discuss in more detail, the rabbis' dismissal of Rabbi Meir's prediction of wolf-wool indicates that they believed Rabban Gamliel's exegesis to be mistaken, as well as that of Rabbi Yochanan. We must therefore seek to understand how these rationalist Geonim and Rishonim understood the story with Rabbi Yochanan—both the reason for the student's punishment, and the meaning of a prediction involving such extraordinary gemstones and pearls.

Different Fates: Different Disbelievers

The first question to address is why Rabbi Yochanan's student is castigated, whereas Rabban Gamliel's student is re-educated. Whereas Rabbi Yochanan condemns his student for requiring empirical evi-

²⁴ Rashi to *Sanhedrin* 100a.

dence to overcome his skepticism, Rabban Gamliel assuages his student's skepticism precisely by providing empirical evidence.

Some resolve the apparent contradiction by claiming that since Rabban Gamliel's student cited a Scriptural verse in support of his argument ("there is nothing new under the sun"), this showed that was basing himself on a Torah viewpoint. Rabbi Yochanan's student, on the other hand, did not base his skepticism on any Torah source.²⁵ As a slight variation of this, one might wish to point out that Rabban Gamliel predicted a supernatural creation, which the student rejected based on a theological position that "there is nothing new under the sun"; Rabbi Yochanan, on the other hand, predicted a naturally-occurring but hitherto undiscovered phenomenon. The rejection of this latter prediction did not stem from a theological opposition, but rather from a doubt as to the legitimacy of making unusual claims based on Scriptural exegesis.

However, rationalists will find difficulty with such explanations. While it is true that Rabbi Yochanan's student did not express his disbelief in theological terms, Rabbi Yochanan himself did not hear the original expression of disbelief (according to most authorities). How, then, did he know that it was not theologically based? The giant gemstones of which Rabbi Yochanan spoke so exceedingly surpass the norm that, even if not technically impossible, they might be legitimately considered beyond the natural order.²⁶ Moreover, the giant pearls are probably even scientifically impossible on a theoretical level, due to biological constraints on the maximum size of oysters. Rambam and others followed the principle that, wherever possible, one should always seek to interpret events naturalistically rather than posit the existence of phenomena beyond the natural order. The student's disbelief was therefore not necessarily a matter of simple cynicism, or of his following the skeptics' principle that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof." Rather, he may merely have opposed the idea of positing the existence of supernatural phenomena. This, too, is a theological stance. In fact, we see a similar position

²⁵ Rabbi Yekusiel Aryeh Kamalher, *HaTalmud U'Mada'ei HaTevel*, ch. 5, *Shaar Ha-Emunah*, pp. 95-96.

²⁶ Cf. Maharal, *Be'er HaGolab*, *Be'er* 5, regarding why Moses could not have literally been ten cubits tall.

taken by Rabbi Meir Abulafia, himself hardly an extreme rationalist.²⁷ The Talmud cites Rava as exegetically deriving from Scripture that in the Messianic Era, there will be eighteen thousand righteous people standing before God. Rashi explains this as referring to “the celestial Jerusalem,” to which Rabbi Meir Abulafia responds:

...But we, in our poverty of understanding, do not know where this celestial Jerusalem, discussed in the Talmud, is, or where it is destined to be. If it is in the Heavens (i.e. a spiritual location) – is there building in the Heavens? And if it is the name of an elevation in the sky called Jerusalem, then it means that the future sitting of the righteous will be in the sky, and this is astonishing: How can these bodies sit in the sky, with it not being by way of a miracle? And it is difficult in my eyes to rely on the work of miracles, in matters for which there is not a clear proof from Scripture or a widespread acceptance amongst the words of the Sages.²⁸ But we have already discharged the obligation of truth, to clarify our doubts and the perplexity in which we are confused, and perhaps God will illuminate our eyes from Heaven to explain the simple meaning of this passage. (*Yad Ramah, Sanhedrin 97b*)

Rabbi Meir Abulafia is reluctant to accept that the Messianic Era will involve a miraculous event, in the absence of a clear proof from Scripture or a widespread acceptance amongst the words of the Sages. The more committed rationalists, then, would certainly oppose a literal reading of Rabbi Yochanan’s exegesis, and would not enforce an obligation to accept it solely because Rabbi Yochanan expounded it. From the rationalist perspective we must still account for the reason Rabbi Yochanan’s student was condemned, while Rabban Gamliel’s was corrected.

²⁷ See Bernard Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition: The Career and Controversies of Ramah* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).

²⁸ “*Kabbalah peshutah b’divei chachamim.*” See too *Yad Ramah to Sanhedrin 90a*. The translation of this phrase follows Septimus, loc. cit. See Rabbam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Tefillah* 2:19, 4:6, 5:15, 13:1; *Hilchos Ishus* 16:1; and numerous other places.

Different Fates: Different Rabbis

Another possible way of explaining the different responses of Rabbi Yochanan and Rabban Gamliel entails focusing on the Rabbi in question, rather than the student. The Talmud records several instances in which Rabbi Yochanan responded harshly to a perceived insult, with grave consequences.

The first example involves a dispute with ²⁹Resh Lakish regarding the halachic status of certain weapons. Rabbi Yochanan commented that Resh Lakish, as a former bandit, would know about such things.³⁰ Resh Lakish responded: “And what good did it do me? Before I was called a master, and now I am called a master.” Maharsha explains that “master” means a master of Torah; Resh Lakish meant that before he was a bandit, he was a Torah scholar, and his knowledge of this law remained from those days, not from his days as a bandit. However, Rabbi Yochanan wrongly assumed that “master” meant a master of banditry, and that Resh Lakish insinuated that Rabbi Yochanan’s efforts in bringing him to Torah were meaningless, since he is still described as a master bandit. Rabbi Yochanan therefore took offense and retorted that, in fact, he had benefited him by bringing him back to Torah. As a result of the offense he caused Rabbi Yochanan, Resh Lakish fell ill, and when Rabbi Yochanan refused the request of his sister (to whom Resh Lakish was married) to pray for him, Resh Lakish died.³¹

The second such anecdote³² describes a case with Rabbi Yochanan and his new student, Rav Kahana. Rabbi Yochanan was taken aback at Rav Kahana’s powerful questions. Rabbi Yochanan looked at his student, and, due to the cut Rav Kahana had on the side of his mouth, thought his student was laughing at him. Rabbi Yochanan became upset, and Rav Kahana died as a result. Rabbi

²⁹ *Bava Metzja* 84a.

³⁰ Rabbi Chanoch Geberhard, *Shiurim B’Haggados Chazal*, stresses that Rabbi Yochanan meant no offense with this comment; however, it perhaps comes as no great surprise that offense was taken.

³¹ Rashi has a different explanation of this story: Rabbi Yochanan correctly assessed that Resh Lakish had said something inappropriately cynical.

³² *Bava Kama* 117a.

Yochanan later had to seek forgiveness for causing Rav Kahana's death.

In a third account,³³ Rabbi Yochanan grew angry with his student Rabbi Elazar, who related one of his teachings without reporting it in Rabbi Yochanan's name. Others pointed out that he should not be angry, since Rabbi Elazar himself was rebuked for losing his temper in a dispute with a peer. But at this, Rabbi Yochanan grew even angrier, retorting that while it was obviously inappropriate for Rabbi Elazar and his peer (who was his equal) to grow angry with each other, he is entitled to be angry at his student. He was only appeased when others pointed out that, in any case, people know that Rabbi Elazar reports Rabbi Yochanan's teachings. While the Talmud proceeds to explain why Rabbi Yochanan legitimately wanted his teachings to be related in his name, it may be no coincidence that, of all people, it is Rabbi Yochanan who is involved in this case.

In all these stories, we see Rabbi Yochanan taking offense at what he inaccurately perceived as a slight to his honor, sometimes with disastrous results. In the case of Rav Kahana, we see that Rabbi Yochanan even brought about his death, despite the fact that he was mistaken in thinking that Rav Kahana had committed a wrong against him. Accordingly, the fate of Rabbi Yochanan's student in our story may reflect more on Rabbi Yochanan than on the student. Perhaps the student had legitimate reason not to believe his teacher, but Rabbi Yochanan was offended at the student not believing him.

However, this is not an entirely satisfactory explanation. In these stories, Rabbi Yochanan misunderstood the situation, whereas in our story he did not; he was correct to infer that the student would not have believed him without seeing it. Furthermore, Rabbi Zeira presents the story of the skeptical student as Rabbi Yochanan's criterion for a heretic, and apparently endorses it as a valid view. Thus, even if Rabbi Yochanan had a tendency towards harsh reactions, which would account for why this student suffered different consequences than Rabban Gamliel's student, the student's actions are genuinely rated as heresy, at least according to Rabbi Yochanan. We therefore still need to understand how the rationalist school of thought interprets this story.

³³ Talmud, *Yevamos* 96b.

Problems Other than the Student's Rationalism

One might suggest that the crime of Rabbi Yochanan's student was not his disbelief of Rabbi Yochanan's prediction, but rather in the scornful manner in which he expressed it. The student in this story is described as scoffing rather than respectfully disagreeing, and it is this attitude that accounts for his culpability.

Yet this explanation is difficult. True, the term used is *lagleg*, which is variously translated as "scoff," "mock," "ridicule," etc, but that does not necessarily mean that he used such a tone; it may refer to the mere fact of his disagreement. The latter seems more likely, given the fact that Rabbi Yochanan did not condemn the student until he returned from his voyage, at which point he was speaking respectfully. Therefore, we see that Rabbi Yochanan called him a scoffer based on the content of his statement, not its form.

Rabbi Moshe Tzuriel points to a different problem. He notes that while with Rabbi Yochanan's other expositions, it says "Rabbi Yochanan *said...*," here it says "Rabbi Yochanan *expounded*", that is, in public. The student's critique therefore could harm the public's faith.³⁴ Still, this alone does not seem to explain Rabbi Yochanan's condemnation.

Could it be that there was a pre-existing problem with the student, and his skepticism of Rabbi Yochanan's words was merely the final straw? Several authorities note that the Talmud does not speak of "*talmid echad*" ("one student") but rather of "*oso talmid*" ("a certain student"). This term is frequently understood to refer to a particular person whose name ought not to be mentioned.

Rabbi Menachem Tzvi Teksin suggests that the "certain student" in Rabban Gamliel's story is the student who "spoiled his dish" in public i.e. Jesus (see *Sanhedrin* 103a).³⁵ Maharatz Chajes cites a view that the "certain student" in this story is the apostle Paul, but disputes this as Paul learned from Rabban Gamliel the Elder, whereas the Rabban Gamliel of this passage is Rabban Gamliel of Yavneh.³⁶ However, Rabbi Yaakov Brill states that this *was* Rabban Gamliel the

³⁴ *Otzros Ha-Aggadah: Biurei Aggados* (1990).

³⁵ *Orach Yesbarim* (Peuterkov 1907) vol. I p. 66.

³⁶ Maharatz Chajes, *Kuntras Acharon, Avodas HaMikdash* ch. 4.

Elder and thus the unnamed student was Paul.³⁷ Rabbi Nosson Nota Leiter cites several academics who share this view.³⁸

The student in Rabbi Yochanan's story must have been a different person, since Rabbi Yochanan lived much later than Rabban Gamliel. But if the phrase "a certain student" in the story with Rabban Gamliel referred to a problematic individual, the phrase in the story with Rabbi Yochanan may likewise refer to a similar person. The Midrash³⁹ presents a slightly different version of Rabbi Yochanan's story, in which the text reads "there was an *apikores* there" rather than "a certain student". This may be because the Talmud (in *Sanhedrin*) states that his remark to Rabbi Yochanan appears as heresy, or it might mean that he was already an *apikores*. If the latter, we cannot extrapolate from Rabbi Yochanan's condemnation that one must categorically accept his statement.

However, again, since Rabbi Zeira presents this story as an example of Rabbi Yochanan's definition of heresy, it seems that his specific conduct, not his prior history, were to blame.

The Rationalist Approach

The key to the rationalist approach to this story—to understanding why the student was condemned apparently for the crime of rationalism itself—requires realizing that the rationalists' approach to Rabbi Yochanan's exegesis differs greatly from their traditionalist counterparts. So far, all the authorities that we have cited interpret the statements of Rabbi Yochanan and Rabban Gamliel literally, as referring to wondrous physical phenomena that will appear in the Messianic Era. But others interpret these accounts figuratively, or allegorically. One explanation of Rabbi Yochanan's words is given by Rabbi David HaKochavi of Avignon, France (c. 1260-1330):

...We have already noted that we are citing many passages without explaining them, and we have noted the reasons. Accordingly, we have cited this passage, but with a little contemplation it will be seen that there is hidden meaning... it alludes to the merit of the

³⁷ *Ben Zekunim* (Galicia 1889) p. 92.

³⁸ Responsa *Tziyon LeNefesh Chayah* 59.

³⁹ *Midrash Yalkut Shimoni*, Yeshayah 56, *remez* 478.

intellect when it penetrates the entrances of true opinions... (*Sefer HaBatim* I, 6:4, pp. 185)

Rabbi Yochanan was *not* making a statement about the physical world. The student interpreted it as such and therefore mocked it; he was castigated because, had he not been shown otherwise, he would not have appreciated that Rabbi Yochanan was speaking allegorically.

Similarly, with regard to Rabban Gamliel's statements, Rambam writes that these were not intended to be interpreted literally as referring to the physical reality:

There will be no difference between this world and the Messianic Era except regarding the subjugation to kingdoms... but in those days, it will be very easy for people to obtain sustenance, to the point that with minimal effort a person will reap great benefits, and this is what is meant when they said that the Land of Israel is destined to grow fresh bread and garments of fine wool ... and therefore this sage, who stated this to his student, became angry when his student did not understand his words and thought that he was speaking literally. (Rambam, *Perush HaMishnayos*, Introduction to *Perek Chelek*)

The student erred in interpreting Rabban Gamliel's statements in this way, and Rabban Gamliel, following the maxim of "answer the fool according to his folly," responded by showing him how such things could be physically possible. But this did not reflect the true meaning of his original statement.

Rambam's son responds sharply to comments made by Rabbi Shlomo ben Avraham of Montpellier, who had attacked Rambam for taking an allegorical approach to the wonders of the Messianic Era:

In his letter, he also anxiously complained and moaned about [the rationalist approach regarding] the feast of Leviathan, the wine that has been preserved in the grape [since creation], fresh bread of the finest quality, and garments of fine wool. He was raised from his youth and studied day and night with all his might and all his soul to receive these as his rewards to fill his stomach with the flesh of the Leviathan and the fresh bread of finest quality and his mind was in the wine that has been kept preserved in the grape, and to wear some of those garments of fine wool. It is certain that our Sages only cited these Midrashim and their like to engage his interest and others like him, just as we engage the interest of children in studying Torah in school all week by distributing sweets and nuts

to them on Shabbos and dressing them in pressed cloths on the festivals... (Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam, *Milchamos Hashem*)

Rabbi Shem Tov ibn Shaprut (14th century) writes similarly:

Know that these sayings are not to be understood literally – for if the literal interpretation were true, then Scripture would state it. And even when (the Sages) say it, we will not believe that these could be true according to their literal meaning. For what advantage would there be in such things, save for those lacking in intellect who think that the goal of man is to eat and drink and enjoy this world. Rather, the intent of their saying that women will give birth every day is that God will strengthen the natural forces such that women will not miscarry, and that there will not be infant deaths (i.e. giving birth will be an “everyday occurrence” with no risk of tragedy)... And because that student did not devote himself to understanding this, but rather took the words at face value in order to mock the words of Chazal, his rebbe grew angry at him... (*Pardes Rimonim, Seder Moed*, pp. 45-46)

We also find a non-literal interpretation in *Ein Yaakov*:

Here we learn that the truth of these expositions is not in accordance with their simple meaning, as the student thought. And that which Rabban Gamliel answered him according to his way of thinking, was by way of “Answer a fool according to his folly.” But the true intent of these and similar sayings is that in the Messianic Era, success will be in abundance, and great outpouring, and it will be easy to obtain food to eat and clothing to wear, to the point that it will appear as though the earth is producing ready-baked bread to eat and clothes of fine wool to wear, and a person will be able to obtain all of them with little effort. It does not mean that the order of creation will change from its normal status, but rather that a person will be able to obtain his needs with ease, and he will not need the great effort that is required in times such as ours. (Rabbi Yaakov Ibn Chaviv, *HaKoseiv, Ein Yaakov to Shabbos* 30b)

In a detailed explanation of Rabbi Yochanan’s allegory, Rabbi Avraham Stein explains that the gemstones symbolically represent the precious Torah sages, whose insights are brilliant and illuminating.⁴⁰ He claims that it alludes specifically to this account:

⁴⁰ Rabbi Avraham Stein, *Avnei Miluim* (Warsaw 1900), pp. 36-40.

The Rabbis taught: Hillel the Elder had seventy students. Thirty of them were worthy of having the Divine Presence rest upon them, like Moshe Rabbeinu, thirty were worthy of having the sun stand still for them, like Yehoshua ben Nun, and twenty were intermediate. (Talmud, *Bava Basra* 133)

The gemstones and pearls, thirty cubits by thirty cubits, represent the two groups of thirty students. The more precious gemstones symbolize the top tier, and the less valuable pearls, the lower one. The twenty cubits carved out of the middle represent the twenty intermediate students. This was Rabbi Yochanan's intent; however, his student assumed that he was referring literally to gemstones and pearls, and therefore ridiculed his words. But when the student set sail – which metaphorically refers to his sailing in the sea of the Talmud⁴¹ – he came across this account of Hillel's students and realized that Rabbi Yochanan was alluding to this account, not physical gemstones.

The rationalist approach to Rabbi Yochanan's story reflects the complete opposite of the traditionalist one: the student was not castigated for his rational skepticism; on the contrary Rabbi Yochanan rebukes him for foolishly assuming that his prediction was meant literally. In other words, he was punished for attributing a *lack* of rationalism to one of the sages.

Two Distinct Approaches

But there exists yet another approach to this topic which does not rest upon a commitment to either the rationalist or traditionalist interpretation. Let us recall the third case, buried in *Midrash Kobeles Rabbah*, which appears to have escaped the attention of those who compared and discussed the first two cases:

Rabbi Meir sat and expounded: The wolf is destined (in the Messianic Era) to have a fleece of fine wool, and the dog will have the coat of ermine (to make clothing for the righteous). They said to him, "Enough, Rabbi Meir! There is nothing new under the sun." (*Midrash Kobeles Rabbah* 1:28)

⁴¹ Cf. *HaKoseiv* in *Ein Yaakov*: "that he immersed himself deep in wisdom, and grasped the matter."

Here, too, one finds the same potential for dispute—whether the prediction was intended literally, or figuratively. *Etz Yosef* explains Rabbi Meir’s view as allegorically alluding to the subjugation of nature to man’s will. But regardless of whether it was meant literally or allegorically, the Midrash presents Rabbi Meir’s colleagues firmly rejecting his prediction.. Maharzav, in his commentary on the Midrash, relates this to a well-known dispute elsewhere:

Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba said: Rabbi Yochanan said that all the prophecies of the prophets (concerning the wondrous events of the future salvation) were only with regard to the Messianic Era, but in the World to Come, “The eye has not seen, O God, except for You [what He will do for he that awaits Him]” (Isaiah 64:3) (and we have no image of how it will be). And he argues with Shmuel, for Shmuel said, There is no difference between this world and the Messianic Era aside from the subjugation to empires alone, as it says, “For the poor shall not cease from amidst the land” (Deut. 15:11). (Talmud, *Berachos* 34b; cf. *Sanhedrin* 99a and *Shabbos* 63a)

Maharzav explains that the Rabbis who scorned Rabbi Meir’s view agreed fundamentally with Shmuel, that the only difference between this era and the Messianic era will be the Jewish People’s autonomy. Now, these Rabbis and Shmuel would, presumably, equally oppose the prediction of Rabbi Yochanan.⁴² Accordingly, while Rabbi Yochanan condemned the student for rejecting his view, there is an accepted body of authorities who would have likewise rejected it, although possibly in a different manner (and it may be more acceptable for established authorities, rather than students, to dispute Rabbi Yochanan). There is a fundamental dispute between these authorities regarding whether the usual natural order will continue into the Messianic Era.

⁴² This is certainly true with regard to the literal meaning of his prediction, and possibly even with regard to the allegorical one, if it existed. Whether they would also have opposed Rabban Gamliel’s prediction is debatable; he seemed to agree with Shmuel’s view of the Messianic era, since he saw fit to show that his prediction did *not* contravene the concept that there is nothing new under the sun.

The Riddle of Rambam

The above resolution, however, presents us with a question. We saw earlier that Rambam and several others reinterpreted Rabban Gamliel's prediction according to a naturalistic perspective. But we can now ask why this was necessary when in any case, of the two parallel accounts, one (Rabbi Meir's prediction) is rejected precisely because it is not a naturalistic perspective, and the other (Rabbi Yochanan's prediction) is from someone who is disputed by Shmuel precisely because he does not have a naturalistic perspective! Why did they could simply have stated that Rabbi Yochanan and Rabban Gamliel were of the non-naturalistic school of thought, whereas they follow the rationalist one?

The answer to this question may emerge from a consideration of another difficulty with Rambam's approach to this topic. Many, beginning with *Kesef Mishnah* and *Lechem Mishneh*, have noted that Rambam appears to side with both sides of the dispute between Rabbi Yochanan and Shmuel. At first, he presents Rabbi Yochanan's opinion, that the wondrous benefits promised by prophets will take place in the Messianic Era:

The early Sages already informed us that it is not within the power of man to properly grasp the pleasures of the World-to-Come; there is nobody who knows its greatness, beauty and strength apart from the Holy One alone, and all the benefits that the prophets prophesied for Israel were only with regard to material matters that Israel will enjoy in the Messianic Era when rulership will return to Israel. But the pleasure of the life of the World-to-Come have no value or comparison, and the prophets did not give it any analogy, so as not to degrade it with the analogy. That is what Isaiah said, "The eye has not seen, O God, except for You [what He will do for he that awaits Him]." (*Hilchos Teshuvah* 8:7)

Yet Rambam immediately proceeds to cite Shmuel's view that the Messianic Era will not include any departures from the norm, aside from Israel's national autonomy:

...but the days of the Messiah are in this world, and the world will proceed as usual, except that kingship will return to Israel. And the early Sages already said, There is no difference between this world and the Messianic Era apart from the subjugation to empires. (*Hilchos Teshuvah* 9:2)

In a different context, Rambam relates Shmuel's opinion, this time without mentioning another view:

1. Do not think for a moment that in the Messianic Era, something from the worldly norms will be annulled, or that there will be an innovation in the works of Creation. Rather, the world will function as usual... (He proceeds to explain the prophecies about predators living in peace with their prey as speaking metaphorically about the enemies of Israel.) 2. The Sages said: There is no difference between this world and the Messianic Era apart from the subjugation to empires. (*Hilchos Melachim* 12:1-2)

How can Rambam agree with both positions of a dispute – with the view that the Messianic Era will include wonders, and with the view that it will not? One suggestion is that Rambam in fact does not align himself with either opinion, but cites both, since it is impossible to know the future with any certainty.⁴³ But this seems difficult because Rambam did not withhold his own firm predictions about the Messianic Era. Alternatively, one may posit that Shmuel refers to the era of Mashiach ben Yosef, while Rabbi Yochanan speaks about the era of Mashiach ben David.⁴⁴ However, the Talmud does not mention this at all, and, moreover, frames the exchange between Shmuel and Rabbi Yochanan as an argument.

Many answer that while Rabbi Yochanan and Shmuel did disagree, Rambam only writes about the complementary aspects of their respective views. Rambam actually holds like Shmuel, and only invokes the words of Rabbi Yochanan insofar as they support Shmuel's position. Shmuel also agrees that the wondrous prophecies apply to the Messianic Era (not to the World-to-Come), but he interprets them allegorically, whereas Rabbi Yochanan interprets them literally. Accordingly, Rambam only includes the verse brought by Rabbi Yochanan to prove that the prophecies refer to the Messianic Era, but not to support Rabbi Yochanan's view that one must interpret the prophecies literally.⁴⁵

⁴³ *Arba'ab Turei Even to Hilchos Teshuvah* ch. 8.

⁴⁴ Ben Aryeh to Rambam, *Hilchos Teshuvah* 8:7, also discussed by Rabbi Hillel Rotenberg, *Mefa'arei Lev* (Jerusalem 2006) pp. 52-53.

⁴⁵ Rabbi Yedidiah Shmuel Tarika, *Ben Yedid* (Salonika 1806) to *Hilchos Teshuvah* 8:7; *Maase Rokeach* to *Hilchos Teshuvah* loc cit.; *Mishneh Kesef* to *Hilchos Teshuvah* loc cit.; *Be'eros HaMayim* to *Hilchos Teshuvah* loc cit.;

Using a similar logic, but arriving at the opposite conclusion, *Lechem Mishneh* and *Markeves HaMishneh* explain that Rambam agrees with Rabbi Yochanan, and only cites the words of Shmuel insofar as they support Rabbi Yochanan's position. In Rambam's view, Rabbi Yochanan himself did not believe that the prophecies of wonders in the Messianic Era were speaking of supernatural events, but rather of naturalistic developments. Shmuel, on the other hand, did not believe that even naturalistic changes will occur, other than the release of Israel from subjugation. But Rambam only quotes Shmuel's statement because it aptly expresses the idea that nature itself will not change.

Others, however, take an entirely different view, and claim that in Rambam's view, no dispute between Rabbi Yochanan and Shmuel exists. Both understood that the prophecies were intended allegorically (and in regard to the Messianic Era). Why, then, did the Talmud present them as arguing? Radvaz suggests that this was done because the masses will not be motivated to aspire to the Messianic Era if it does not include supernatural wonders. The Talmud therefore presented their dialogue as a dispute, so that the masses will believe that, according to Rabbi Yochanan, supernatural wonders await.⁴⁶

We see that according to *Lechem Mishneh*, *Markeves HaMishnah* and Radvaz, Rambam understood that none of the Sages believed in supernatural events in the Messianic Era. Accordingly, that is why he interpreted Rabban Gamliel's predictions in a deeper manner, and he would presumably even do the same with Rabbi Yochanan's predictions.

While this explains the way Rambam reads Rabban Gamliel's predictions, in light of the Midrash concerning Rabbi Meir, which

Rabbi Yosef Kappach, *Kesavim*, vol. II, *shaar revii*. Cf. Chida, *Responsa Chaim Sho'el* 98, Rabbi Shlomo Algazi, *Gufei Halachos* (Izmir 1675), *Klalei Ha-Alef* 35, and Dror Fixler, "HaBitui Chachamim/ Chasidim Rishonim beMishneh Torah LeRambam," *Sinai* (1992) vol. 109 pp. 75-79. Rabbi Chaim Nethanzen in *Avodah Tamah* (Altona 1872) *Neilas Shearim* similarly states that Rambam adopted Shmuel's view and reinterpreted the position of Rabbi Yochanan so that he could present it in a way that would not conflict with this. Rabbi Ben-Tzion Sternfeld in *Shaarei Tziyon* (Pieterkov 1903), vol. III, *Biyyur Ma'amar Temuha*, also seems to be presenting this approach.

⁴⁶ Responsa Radvaz from manuscript, vol. VIII #71.

may not have been available to Rambam, it seems that some Sages understood their contemporaries' Messianic predictions literally.

Another Debate over Rationalism

Earlier, we cited the account of Rabbi Yochanan's bitter exchange with Resh Lakish in the context of a halachic dispute about weapons. Rabbi Shmuel Dvir interprets this dispute as one concerning the legitimacy of empirical evidence itself. Rabbi Dvir then applies his reading to the story of Rabbi Yochanan's and his skeptical student.⁴⁷

Rabbi Yochanan rated tradition as the primary source of knowledge, and rejected empirical observations as a worthy alternative. Therefore, he reacted harshly to his student's disbelieving attitude. Resh Lakish, on the other hand, valued empirical experiences as a source of knowledge, and disputed Rabbi Yochanan's halachic rulings concerning weapons based on his own experiences. Rabbi Yochanan derided the notion of accepting the knowledge of a bandit, but Resh Lakish responded that just as his mastery of Torah gives him authority, so did his mastery of banditry give him expertise in these weapons. Rabbi Yochanan retorted that by bringing him to Torah, he attached Resh Lakish to a higher source of knowledge, and took offense at Resh Lakish's position that there exists another legitimate way to acquire knowledge.

Rabbi Dvir accordingly sees Rabbi Yochanan as battling to uphold the principle that traditional sources of knowledge have exclusive authority in determining truth. This caused Rabbi Yochanan to react so harshly to his student's rejection of his Messianic predictions.

Summary and Conclusion

We began by noting that the story of Rabbi Yochanan's student appears to be a powerful condemnation of rationalism, and is indeed interpreted that way by several authorities. But our investigation has shown that matters are far from unequivocal. There is a long-standing dispute regarding whether Rabbi Yochanan was speaking literally. If he was speaking literally, then Shmuel, Rambam, and others hold the student's essential position, and we would be forced to

⁴⁷ Cited by Rabbi Moshe Tzuriel, *Biurei Aggados to Bava Matz'ia* 84a.

propose other reasons for Rabbi Yochanan's condemnation. If Rabbi Yochanan was not speaking literally, then this account is hardly an attack against rationalism, but rather against those who do not interpret the Sages in a rationalist way.

We therefore have an extraordinary situation which sets rationalists and traditionalists at polar extremes. In explaining Rabbi Yochanan's definition of a heretic, rationalists and traditionalists each see the other as the focus of Rabbi Yochanan's condemnation. The traditionalists see Rabbi Yochanan as castigating his student for being a rationalist, while the rationalists see Rabbi Yochanan as castigating his student for not realizing that he himself was a rationalist.⁴⁸ This story demonstrates the enormous consequences that emerge from the difference between rationalists and traditionalists. Yet, at the same time, we see that both rationalists and traditionalists of today can each point to a long history of authorities whose approach they are following. The first step towards peaceful coexistence is understanding the opposite position, and appreciating its long history in the authorities of the past. ❧

⁴⁸ However, Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam writes that while the literalist interpretation is wrong, it does no harm provided that one does not reject the interpretation as a result. Rambam, on the other hand, writes that literalist interpretations make a mockery of the Sages.

* I would like to thank all those who helped me in discussing and debating this essay, especially Rabbi Nesanel Neuman and David Sidney.