

## *Rashi's Stance on Corporealism: A Response to Rabbi Zucker*

**By: NATAN SLIFKIN**

Many people, including Roshei Yeshivah, rejected my article “Was Rashi a Corporealist?” on the simple grounds that it just couldn’t possibly be true, and saw no need to even address the varied lines of evidence that I brought (and in some cases, they dismissed the article without even reading it). I am grateful to Rabbi Saul Zucker for actually providing detailed arguments against my hypothesis; until one has a dedicated opponent, one cannot know if one’s arguments have really been tested. Zucker brings up some very valuable further sources from Rashi, and some interesting arguments, but I must state that I am a little taken aback at the inclusion in his article of comments to blog posts. Like a *chavrusa* discussion, these surely have no place in a journal, which is designed for more professional writing, based on more *yishuv ha-da’as*; it also means that large portions of his article are simply redundant. Still, since Zucker decided to include these, I will also do likewise, but I will try to keep it to a minimum.

In my original article, I brought a range of evidence for Rashi being a corporealist, after which I also discussed possible counter-arguments. I concluded in the end that the evidence overall converges towards Rashi being a corporealist. Rabbi Zucker has no such hesitations and is adamant that *all* the evidence shows that Rashi was not a corporealist. He first presents counter-arguments to the various lines of evidence that I brought that Rashi was a corporealist, after which he brings several arguments with which he attempts to prove that Rashi was not a corporealist. I shall deal with these in reverse order, first addressing his arguments that Rashi was not a corporealist, and then examining his attempted rebuttals of the evidence that Rashi was a corporealist.

---

Natan Slifkin teaches at Yeshivat Lev HaTorah in Ramat Bet Shemesh. He is the author of several works on the interface between Torah and the natural world. His work can be found at <[www.zootorah.com](http://www.zootorah.com)> and <[www.rationalistjudaism.com](http://www.rationalistjudaism.com)>.

## The Opening of the Heavens

Zucker's first argument for Rashi not being a corporealist is that Rashi in *Yeshayah*, in two places, links the testimony that there are no other gods to our not seeing any image at Sinai when the seven heavens were opened up. Zucker points out that this testimony only works if the presumption is that anything there that *can* be seen, *would have* been seen; hence, it must be that God is incorporeal, since if He were corporeal but invisible to us, perhaps there are other deities that were likewise hidden from us, and the testimony would be meaningless.

This sounds like an ingenious argument. But before subjecting it to closer inspection, let us look at the context of the verses in *Yeshayah*. They are not discussions of God's incorporeality, or even of His nature at all; rather, they are discussions of His exclusivity, that there is none besides Him, to which God then calls on us to attest. Zucker claims that "the location of this evidence is exactly where we might expect a discussion of incorporeality to be." I am astonished at his claim that the primary evidence that Rashi opposed corporealism ought to be based on a non-explicit inference from a comment in *Navi* on a verse whose purpose is not even to discuss the issue of corporealism. Surely the place where we would expect a discussion of incorporeality to be is the place where every incorporealist Rishon discussed it, which is the very obvious place to discuss it—the numerous verses where the Torah speaks of God in corporealist terms, where Rashi does not say anything at all, and even more fundamentally, with the verse describing man being made in God's image, where Rashi explains that man was made in the *dmus deyokno* of God, without any elaboration. I shall return to this point later.

Zucker claims that "it should come as no surprise that this evidence for Rashi's incorporeality centers around the issue of not seeing any image whatsoever at Sinai; after all, the verse of *lo re'isem kol temmunah*... is a principal proof text for the doctrine of incorporeality"—but what Zucker fails to note is that Rashi makes no comment whatsoever on that verse in *Devarim*. Zucker further claims that Ramban also cited the verse from *Yeshayahu* as one of his proof texts for the doctrine of incorporeality, implying that Ramban uses the same type of argument that he is claiming to be evidence from Rashi. However, Ramban is in fact citing the verse in support of a different claim, that God is not limited by anything.

There is a simple reason as to why Zucker's argument from *Yeshayab* is baseless. When God showed the Jewish People the seven firmaments, He was not showing them all existence. God does not inhabit the seven firmaments, but rather exists beyond them. Accordingly, Rashi's statement that we did not see any deities in the seven firmaments does not have any bearing on God's corporeality; the reason why we did not see God in those seven firmaments is that this was not the place where He is.

When I raised this as a possibility on my website (at the time, I had not yet realized that this was indeed definitely Rashi's view), Zucker responded that this would make the testimony useless, since possibly there are other deities beyond the seven firmaments. Indeed; and one could likewise ask that since, whatever we perceived, was only via God enabling us to perceive it, there may conceivably be some other entity that He did not enable us to perceive? Note that Zucker himself had to concede that he has no idea what this testimony actually means or how it works. He claimed that this is irrelevant, and it is sufficient to know that God did indeed somehow show us that there are no other deities. But, on the contrary, it is extremely relevant; we see that this testimony is based on certain assumptions and givens. Thus, one of those could well be that there are no deities beyond the seven firmaments.

In any case, none of this changes the fact that Zucker's challenge that there could be other deities beyond the seven firmaments (and that the testimony must therefore be taking such regions into account) is not a question on my interpretation of Rashi; this is a question on Rashi, since Rashi clearly limits his discussion to the seven firmaments. We know God was not considered to inhabit these seven firmaments, but rather was thought to be above them. This is made absolutely clear in the Gemara (*Chagigah* 12b, *Yerushalmi Berachos* 9:1, 63a).<sup>1</sup> Rashi's understanding of the testimony was that, as the verses make clear, the goal of these verses is to negate the existence of the deities that other people were worshipping, whose existence was only

---

<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, it is also echoed by Rashi in *Yechezkel* 28:2, where the prince of Tyre is castigated for having claimed to have "sat in God's seat in the heart of the seas," and Rashi explains that "he made a structure that was a replica of the seven firmaments, and he sat on top of the highest one."

conceived of in the seven firmaments. Since God opened up the seven firmaments for us to see, and we did not see them there, we are called on to attest that they do not exist. This has nothing to do whatsoever with God being either corporeal or incorporeal, since He exists beyond the seven firmaments—according to corporealists, spatially removed, and according to the non-corporeal view, in a different dimension. When the Torah states that we “saw no image,” it means that we saw no lesser deities in the seven firmaments. Thus, Zucker’s argument does not even get off the ground.

In fact, there is an abundance of evidence here *in favor* of Rashi being a corporalist. Zucker translates “*shivah raki'im*” as “seven heavens,” but this is a mistake; the correct translation is “seven firmaments.” At least some of these firmaments (and probably all) were not considered to be spiritual dimensions distinct from the physical universe, but rather as concentric crystalline domes<sup>2</sup> encompassing this world. Thus, the Gemara states that the sun, moon and stars inhabit the second firmament,<sup>3</sup> and this was also discussed by several Rishonim who engaged in astronomy and discussed the physical structure of the universe. The fourth firmament is said to house the *Beis HaMikdash Shel Maalah*. While many people today consider it “obvious” that this is a spiritual concept, Rashi did not interpret it that way; in *Sukkah* 41a and *Rosh HaShanah* 30a he refers to the future *Beis HaMikdash* as descending from Heaven, and from his comments to Exodus 15:17, it seems that Rashi identified the third *Beis*

---

<sup>2</sup> Rashi and the Tosafists (in opposition to Rambam and many Sephardic Rishonim) shared the view of many of Chazal, that the universe is a series of concentric domes above a roughly flat earth which reaches the edge of the domes, and that the sun and stars move exclusively on these domes rather than passing below the earth. See Rashi and Tosafos to *Pesachim* 94a and especially the comments of Rashash s.v. *Tosafos* there; see too Rashi’s comments to *Chagigah* 12a and Rabbeinu Tam cited by *Shitah Mekubetztes* to *Kesuvos* 13b and in *Sefer HaYashar, Cbelek HaChiddushim* 221. Rambam and many Sephardic Rishonim, on the other hand, followed the Aristotelian/ Ptolemaic view conceded by Rabbi in *Pesachim* 94b, that the universe is a series of spheres around a spherical earth which is suspended in space. I have written a comprehensive study of this topic which I plan to publish in the near future.

<sup>3</sup> See too Rashi to *Tebillim* 19:7.

*HaMikdash* as being the *Beis HaMikdash Shel Maalah* of the Gemara.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, let us consider Rashi's view that the third *Beis haMikdash* has already been built and is currently stored in Heaven, from where it will eventually descend. If it is going to come *down* in the future, then currently it is *up*, which indicates that Heaven is "up there"; in addition, if Heaven contains physical structures, then it is presumably a spatial, physical realm. Of course, with sufficient ingenuity, a non-literal interpretation can be fitted into Rashi (e.g., that God only created the spiritual "genetic" structure of the *Beis HaMikdash*, which will ultimately come "down" in the sense of materializing physically in our world), but there is no hint of such an explanation in Rashi and the straightforward understanding is certainly as discussed.<sup>5</sup>

We thus see that Rashi, like others, believed that these firmaments were physical regions. We also see this from the fact that Rashi explains the verse stating that "we have been *shown* the knowledge" that there are no other gods as meaning that we actually *saw* these firmaments, with our vision, rather than merely comprehending the firmaments in some intellectual/spiritual sense.<sup>6</sup> From the fact that we *saw* no deities there, as Rashi understands it, we can conclude that they do not exist. In fact, as even Zucker admits, this is also the implication of Rashi's comments in *Yeshayah*—we can attest that there are no other gods because we did not *see* them. We see that Rashi's presumption is that the seven firmaments are a physical realm, and

---

<sup>4</sup> Rashi interprets the verse as stating that the first *Beis HaMikdash* would be directly opposite the celestial *Beis HaMikdash*, which will be established on earth by God in the Messianic Era.

<sup>5</sup> Note too that when Rashi explains a Talmudic description of 18,000 *tzadikim* present in the row before God, which Rashi explains as describing what transpires in the celestial Jerusalem, R. Meir Abulafia expresses consternation at how to understand this, asking that if "celestial" (*ma'alal*) refers to a spiritual realm, there could surely be no actual city of Jerusalem, and if it refers to an area spatially above the earth, surely people could only be present there via a miracle, which he is loathe to invoke absent a clear Biblical basis. See *Yad Ramah, Sanhedrin* 97b. Incidentally, Yonah Frankel in *Darkei shel Rashi bePerusho leTalmud* (Jerusalem, 1975) pp. 304-335 proves that the printed commentary to *Perek Chelek* attributed to Rashi was indeed substantially composed by Rashi, and therefore can be cited as indications of his beliefs.

<sup>6</sup> See Rashi to Deuteronomy 4:35.

that deities would be visible—and thus corporeal. Only someone with a corporeal view of God would work with the assumption that other deities would likewise be corporeal.<sup>7</sup>

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 as R. Avraham ben HaRambam points out, any being that is spatially defined is by definition corporeal. In fact, R. Moshe Taku, in *Kesav Tamim*, uses precisely this sort of argument to argue that God is corporeal, pointing out that in numerous places God is described in spatial terms as being above the rest of the world. Rambam, who also interpreted the seven firmaments as physical spheres encompassing the earth, had to devote an entire chapter (*Guide* 1:7) to an intricate solution as to how the description of God being on top of the firmaments does not mean that He is spatially above them, but there is not even a hint of such an approach in Rashi, nor any evidence that he ever engaged in such philosophical analyses.

In addition, Rashi to *Sanhedrin* 103a, s.v. *Middas haDin*, states that God made a tunnel in the firmament through which he accepted the penitence of Menasheh without the attribute of Judgment knowing about it. Rabbi Meir Abulafia condemns such a literalist approach as severely inappropriate. In my original article, I suggested that Abulafia was objecting only to the implication that God was forced to act surreptitiously, but I now realize that he was presumably objecting to something else as well. Since Rashi interprets the firmaments as domes above the earth, his explanation of the tunnel from Menasheh to God refers to a physical tunnel spatially connecting the two—Menasheh on earth, and God above the firmament.

---

<sup>7</sup> There is still more evidence here for corporealist beliefs. The Midrash from which Rashi is quoting his comments about the seven firmaments is *Pesikta Rabbasi* (not to be confused with *Pesikta d'Raw Kabana*), composed in the ninth century. It further states that at Sinai, God revealed Himself to the Jewish People *ayin b'ayin, eye to eye*, in all His glory, and that when they immediately died and were resurrected, God sent angels to lift up their heads and bodies so that they would be face-to-face with Him. Of course, some will insist that such descriptions *must* be metaphorical, and will engage in intellectual gymnastics in order to devise such interpretations, but how much more explicit can a corporealist be?

There is further confirmation that Rashi believed God to be spatially located above the firmaments—i.e., corporeal. The Gemara (*Chagigah* 13a) states that above the highest firmaments are the *chayos*, and God is above them. Rashi, in his commentary to the Mishnah's disapproval of one who contemplates what is "above," explains this to refer to that which is above the *chayos*—i.e., the realm of God. Someone opposed to the idea of Rashi being a corporealist will insist that Rashi means that God is symbolically/ conceptually above the earth, not literally/ spatially. But a study of Rashi's comments to the Mishnah reveals otherwise. The Mishnah speaks about someone who contemplates "what is above, what is below, what is in front, and what is after." Rashi (in contrast to others) defines the last two categories as referring to that which is in front of the firmament on the eastern horizon and that which is after the edge of the firmament on the western horizon.<sup>8</sup> Since he interprets "in front" and "behind" as spatial regions, it seems clear that he likewise interprets "above" and "below" as spatial regions; not just due to equivalence in terminology, but also because contemplation of those regions of the universe would also have to be discussed. Thus, Rashi's interpretation of "above" as meaning "above the highest firmament" and "below" as "below the earth"<sup>9</sup> 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.

### God's Right and Left

Zucker's second argument is that Rashi in *Bereishis* 1:26 discounts the possibility of right and left before God: "I have seen God sitting on His throne and all the hosts of the heavens standing to His right and to His left" (*Melachim* I 22:19)—but is there such a thing as 'right' and 'left' with regard to God? Rather, these are 'righting' to acquit, and those are 'lefting' to indict." Zucker admits that when Rashi comments on the very verse from *Melachim* cited here, his question "Is there such a thing as 'left' with regard to God?" has nothing to do

---

<sup>8</sup> See too Tosafos there s.v. *yachol*. See too note 3 above regarding Rashi's conception of the structure of the universe.

<sup>9</sup> See Rashash here citing the version of Rashi printed in *Ein Yaakov*, and Rashi to *Chagigah* 16a s.v. *u-mah lematah*.

with incorporeality but rather is referring to the idea of weakness that is symbolically referred to as “left”; Rashi there is asking that surely God only has a “right” (i.e., strength), not a “left.” Nevertheless, Zucker feels that Rashi in *Bereishis* is saying something different, due to the difference in his terminology; in *Melachim*, Rashi only says “is there left before God?” whereas here he asks about right *and* left, and omits the proof texts that appear in his commentary to *Melachim*, which assert that God has (only) a “right.” This certainly seems like a powerful piece of evidence, and it requires careful consideration.

First, let us examine all the sources. Rashi’s source here in *Bereishis* is not the same as that in *Melachim*. Rashi in *Melachim* is based on the Midrash *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 1:45, which states as follows: “I have seen God sitting on His throne and all the hosts of the heavens standing to His right and to His left’ (Kings I 22:19)—but is there such a thing as ‘left’ with regard to God? Surely everything is ‘right’ as it states, ‘Your right hand, O God, is glorified with strength!’ ...Rather, these are ‘righting’ to acquit, and those are ‘lefting’ to indict.” Rashi in *Bereishis*, on the other hand, is basing himself on the Tanchuma, as per his usual practice with his commentary on the Torah. The Tanchuma has this *derashah* in two places, *Shemos* 18 and *Mishpatim* 15. In the former, there is no citation of proof texts about God having only a right. Thus, Zucker’s point about Rashi in *Bereishis* omitting these proof texts is groundless.

Still, the basic question in both Midrashim is the same. An early source for this idea can be found in *Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 1b, which states as follows: “The Holy One does not judge alone, as it is written, ‘...and all the hosts of the heavens standing to His right and to His left’—these incline to acquit, and these incline to indict.” We see that the original discussion was all about the nature of the judicial process and had nothing to do with the incorporeal nature of God.

Now, let us consider the situation. There is a Midrash which is asking about a symbolic left rather than a spatial left. Rashi cites this Midrash in his commentary to the verse cited in the Midrash, where he is clearly also asking about the symbolic left. Rashi also cites a similar Midrash in his commentary to the Torah, with different wording. In order to bring this as evidence for Rashi being an incorporealist, Zucker cannot say that Rashi could *perhaps* mean something different than the Midrash that he is citing, he must show that Rashi really *does*, or very likely does, mean something different than the Midrash that he is citing. Zucker is of the view that Rashi purpose-

fully rephrased the wording of the Midrashim in order to make it refer to spatial issues. But is this reasonable? What is wrong with the original meaning of the Midrash? While it is not unheard of for Rashi to change Midrashim, there would have to be a good reason for him to do so. For what purpose would Rashi suddenly decide to differ from Chazal's own understanding of the question, especially since he was perfectly happy with it elsewhere?

As to why the wording in Rashi's commentary to *Bereishis* is different, this is a good question, but it is still possible to read it as saying the same thing. One must put the emphasis in a certain way, such that Rashi is saying, "Is there such a thing as 'right' and 'left' with regard to God? Surely there is only right!" This becomes easier if we realize that the Midrash, in its question, understands "right and left" as meaning "strong and weak;" thus, the question can be understood as, "Does God have stronger and weaker aspects?!" Opinions may differ as to the viability of this reading, but it is certainly no more difficult than the numerous difficult readings of all the corporealism-inclined comments of Rashi that Zucker will later propose.

In any case, this is not the only refutation of Zucker's argument. There is also a possibility that the text of Rashi here is not even accurate. In the Venice (Bomberg) printing, Rashi only states, "Is there such a thing as 'left' with God?" just like the *Midrash Tanchuma* on which his comment is based. While this version is rated by most as being greatly inferior to the manuscripts, and the several manuscripts that I had checked all included the word "right," it is still something to take into consideration; indeed, the Ariel Edition of *Rashi HaShalem* selected the Venice version as their primary text.<sup>10</sup> The truth is that ascertaining the correct text of Rashi is exceedingly difficult;<sup>11</sup> even the nature of how the commentary came to be written is un-

---

<sup>10</sup> I was not able to engage in a comprehensive study of all or even most of the manuscripts—the National Library in Jerusalem has over 240.

<sup>11</sup> Even with the manuscript Leipzig 1, claimed to be copied from Rashi's student R. Shemayah's own manuscript, there is a dispute as to whether this was truly the chain of transmission and whether R. Shemayah and the copyist inserted their own changes. See the exchange between Elazar Touitou and Avraham Grossman in *Tarbitz* 61 (1991) and 62 (1992).

clear.<sup>12</sup> The manuscript experts that I consulted were divided as to whether this text has credibility in this case; one felt that the *Tanchuma* makes it more likely that the Venice text is correct, another felt that the weight of manuscript evidence negates it, while the third felt it was impossible to determine. It is possible that the copyist upon which the Venice edition is based (or the Venice editor himself) removed the word “right,” in order to bring Rashi in line with the Midrash. Alternately, the Venice text is based on the correct manuscript, which accurately cites the *Midrash Tanchuma*, and the other copyists added the word “or right.” This is entirely plausible—later copyists with a non-corporeal view of God (and without the Midrash in front of them) would naturally assume that the question is that God has no left or right, and would therefore believe that the word “right” had been mistakenly omitted.

Furthermore, even if the correct text does say “left or right,” and even if Rashi does mean that surely there is neither, this does not necessarily mean that he is saying that God is incorporeal. Let us look at the position of R. Moshe Taku, the corporealist Tosafist. In his work *Ksav Tamim*, he addresses the charge of the incorporealists that God could not sit on a throne, since “one who sits on a throne has the throne extending beyond him, and one cannot say this about the Creator, about whom it is said, ‘Surely I fill the heavens and earth.’”<sup>13</sup> R. Moshe Taku sharply scorns this argument, saying, “Are these fools of this world, that they do not realize that our Creator can be without a throne, and no throne can surround Him?! But He created it, and He Himself bears it, to show His greatness to His celestial soldiers...” In support of this, he cites a passage from *Midrash Tanchuma*: “God is greater than his creations... A flesh-and-blood king sits on a stool (i.e., a chair without a back and sides), and others sit to the right and left of him; but God is like a king sitting on a *cathedra* (a type of chair with a back and sides), filling it, and the world is stored away beneath His feet, as it says, ‘Surely I fill the heavens and earth.’”<sup>14</sup> Ac-

---

<sup>12</sup> For example, Israel Ta-Shma (*Creativity and Tradition*, p. 196) suggests a possibility that “Rashi read out his commentary to students of his inner circle and they ‘copied’ or, rather, ‘recorded’ his words in their copy-books, with slight stylistic variations caused by individual differences of inner mental listening.”

<sup>13</sup> *Ksav Tamim*, pp. 85-86.

<sup>14</sup> *Midrash Tanchuma, Bereishis* 5.

According to R. Moshe Taku's understanding, the Midrash here rejects the idea of there being servants sitting to the right and left of God; not because He is incorporeal, but rather because He is far, far larger than His creations, who are like toys before him. Thus, even if Rashi is asking that the verse describing the angels as being on the left and right of God cannot be taken at face value, this does not mean that he is objecting to the corporeal aspects of it. The truth is that, as a full reading of *Kesav Tamim* shows, we are so intellectually removed from the corporeal view—we tend to mistakenly see it as simply foolish—that it is difficult for us to understand the exact nature of it.<sup>15</sup>

In conclusion, then, we cannot be absolutely clear here with regard to whether Rashi even said “Is there a right and left of God?” in the first place, whether if he said it he meant to reject there being a right of God, and whether if he did mean to reject it, he was doing so due to incorporealist beliefs. And even if one sees this particular instance, on its own merits, as being more likely to be a statement about God being incorporeal, it must be taken in the context of Rashi's entire corpus and thus against all that other evidence. This is how analyses of complex issues work—one cannot form conclusions based on a single piece of evidence, but rather one must evaluate all the evidence together and see towards what it converges.

## **God Walking**

Zucker claims to have found one further source where Rashi allegorically interprets a verse which describes God in corporeal terms, and claims that this therefore shows that Rashi was not a corporealist: the description of God “walking to do battle” is interpreted by Rashi as referring to the camp of the Ark.

First, let us note that if Rashi was indeed making an anti-corporeal point here, it would be extremely odd that he would do it in an entirely different way than every other place where he writes against anthropomorphisms. There is no mention of Scripture speaking “as if it were possible” and that it is “to direct the ear according to what it can understand.”

---

<sup>15</sup> The extant portions of *Kesav Tamim* can be downloaded at <<http://www.zootorah.com/KesavTamim.pdf>>.

Second, in any case, this has nothing to do with corporealism. Rashi here is simply citing the Mishnah, and corporealists would have done the same. Zucker admits that a corporealist also would cite the Mishnah, but claims that Rashi is different in that he gives the *basis* for the non-literal explanation as that it is *impossible* for it to refer to God walking. But this is factually incorrect; Rashi says nothing of the sort. Zucker inserts the word “therefore,” in brackets, into his translation of Rashi, in order to present Rashi as saying that *because* God cannot walk, *therefore* it is non-literal. But the word “therefore” is not in Rashi! Rashi does not say that it is impossible for God to walk; he simply notes that the verse implies that it is God walking, and that the Mishnah explains instead that it is the camp of the Ark being discussed.<sup>16</sup> Zucker’s argument is based upon inserting words into Rashi that are simply not there.

### **The Perception of Rashi Amongst the Rishonim**

Zucker’s fourth “evidence” for Rashi not being a corporealist is that there were numerous Rishonim who were not corporealists and who nevertheless greatly revered Rashi. He claims that “had they viewed Rashi as a corporealist, a proponent of what they saw as the antithesis of Judaism, the extensive citations and praise would not be possible.” This statement is false, yet extremely revealing. It shows that Zucker considers that anti-corporealists must consider corporealists to be proposing the antithesis (!) of Judaism and that such a person cannot be cited or praised. Of course, given that view, how could Zucker, or indeed anyone, possibly accept that Rashi was a corporealist?!<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> As to why the Mishnah diverts from that meaning, according to the corporealists—it may be because God was conceived of as being very large (as per *Shiur Komah*) and therefore could not walk amongst people.

<sup>17</sup> Zucker’s words here are particularly remarkable in light of the way that he described his approach to this topic on my website, where he made the utterly astonishing claim about himself that he can “categorically state” that he has “no tendency that prevents an unprejudiced consideration of this question.” If he rates corporealists as proposing the antithesis of Judaism, and as not deserving praise or even quoting from, he obviously is not especially open (to put it mildly) to the suggestion that Rashi was a corporealist.

But while Rambam probably felt the same way about corporealists, and Rabbi Zucker may well be a dedicated follower of Rambam, most of the Rishonim did *not* share that view of corporealists. Riaz stated that even some of Chazal were corporealists, and yet he clearly respected them and studied their words. Ra'avad opposed corporealism, yet he writes that some of the corporealists were *greater and better* people than Rambam.<sup>18</sup> Ramban, writing to the French rabbis that he presumed to be corporealists, addresses them with great respect even as he rebukes them; he also praises R. Moshe Taku, a prominent corporealist, as being “a great *chacham*.”<sup>19</sup> R. Avraham b. Azriel, while opposed to the corporealist interpretations of R. Moshe Taku, nevertheless refers to him as a *tzaddik*.<sup>20</sup> (Even Rambam, who himself did not respect corporealists, notes that corporealists were rated by others as Torah scholars.) These Rishonim clearly did not see corporealist beliefs as reason not to respect people greatly and benefit from their other teachings.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the fact that many Rishonim respected Rashi is no proof that they did not consider him to be a corporealist.

(Interestingly, R. Meir Abulafia, who does sharply criticize Rashi's literalist and anthropomorphic interpretations of certain Aggdatas as being theologically inappropriate, does not mention Rashi

---

<sup>18</sup> While some have suggested that milder versions of Ra'avad's comment should be preferred, research shows that the version found in all standard editions as well as the Frankel edition is the most accurate. See Warren Z. Harvey, “The Incorporeality of God in Maimonides, Rabad, and Spinoza,” *Studies in Jewish Thought* (S. Heller Wilensky - M. Idel, eds.; Jerusalem: The Magnes Press 1989) pp. 69-73 (Hebrew); Kauffman, *Geschichte der Attributenlehre in der Jüdischen Religionsphilosophie des Mittelalters von Saadia bis Maimuni* (Gotha, 1877-78) pp. 487-8, and Isadore Twersky, *Rabad of Posquieres* (Harvard University Press 1962), p. 282 n. 52. Harvey (note 27) observes that the reason why toned-down versions of Ra'avad's comment exist is obvious; R. Yosef Karo expresses shock that “how could a holy mouth describe corporealists as greater and better people than Rambam?!” and therefore prefers a different version of the text. This further demonstrates how people's axiomatic theological beliefs about corporealism affect their approach to analyzing this topic.

<sup>19</sup> See *Chiddushei HaRamban to Gittin 7b*.

<sup>20</sup> Urbach, *Arugat HaBosem*, vol. I, p. 268; see too Kanarfogel, p. 130.

<sup>21</sup> As Zucker himself points out in a Lookjed discussion on a different topic, the Ritva held that Rambam's view of *asmachta* was *derech minnus*, and yet nevertheless he held the Rambam in high esteem.

by name, even though he clearly is referring to him; apparently it was not acceptable in his circles to publicly criticize Rashi for this approach.)

Zucker attempts to bolster the strength of his argument with the claim that R. Simcha of Vitry, a disciple of Rashi, was not only not personally a corporealist, but even considered corporealists to be heretics, indicating that his teacher, Rashi, could not possibly have been a corporealist. Zucker bases this on a passage found in the Commentary to *Mishnayot Avos* 3:14 (stating that God expressed His great love for mankind by endowing humans with His own *tzelem*), reproduced in the *Machzor Vitry*, p. 514. In actuality, however, this passage was not written by Simcha of Vitry,<sup>22</sup> but represents a later scribal interpolation “correcting” the original comment which, like the rest of the Commentary to *Avos*, was written by R. Yaakov b. Shimshon. The original comment condemned those who would place a disjunctive cantillation between *tzelem* and *Elokim* in *Bereishis* 1:27. These misguided individuals, argues R. Yaakov b. Shimshon, 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 *tzelem*.

R. Moshe Taku cites the original version of R. Yaakov’s comment and reminds his readers of R. Yaakov b. Shimshon’s great status—he was a disciple of Rashi and the teacher of Rabbeinu Tam. Zucker claims that this version of R. Yaakov’s comment is only saying that someone who reads the verse in a way that implies him to believe that God has no “beingness”—no actual existence—is suspected of heresy, and “is not relevant per se to the issue of corporealism one way or the other.” But it is absurd to claim that a person would be interpreting the account of God creating man in a way that means that God does not exist! Furthermore, this interpretation of R. Yaakov’s statement is entirely at odds with the context and purpose for which R. Moshe Taku cites it; how can Zucker say that it is not relevant to the issue of corporealism when R. Moshe Taku cites it precisely in support of his corporealist position?<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> In my previous article, I erred in conceding that R. Simcha of Vitry was not a corporealist. In fact, there is no evidence for this at all.

<sup>23</sup> See *Kesav Tamim* (at <<http://www.zootorah.com/KesavTamim.pdf>>) pp. 59-60. See Shamma Friedman’s article in *Sidra* 22 (2007), “*Tzelem*,

A study of R. Moshe Taku's work reveals the true meaning of the citation from R. Yaakov. R. Moshe Taku explains that God possesses a *tzelem*, which he defines as a corporeal nature, but not a *demus*, which he defines as a fixed form; God is able to metamorphose His *tzelem* into whichever shape he wants. In support of his position, he cites R. Yaakov b. Shimshon, who states that the person who denies that God possesses a *tzelem* is denying that God can have any corporeal existence, and is therefore suspected of being a heretic, since there are so many verses and Talmudic statements (according to R. Moshe Taku) which attest to God being corporeal. This discussion certainly negates Zucker using the version of the text in *Machzor Vitri* as evidence that a student of Rashi considered corporealists to be suspected heretics. Instead, it is evidence that one of Rashi's own students was a corporealist, which has obvious implications for Rashi himself.

Let us return to Zucker's claim that there were Rishonim who did not believe Rashi to be a corporealist. Even if it can be shown that this is true, what of it? Zucker claims that these Rishonim supersede me in their analytical skills; but this is irrelevant, since their efforts were not applied to this topic. The key problem is Zucker's claim that these Rishonim supersede me in their mastery of Rashi's commentary, and that I have no advantage over them in terms of sensitivity to this issue that would enable me to detect something that they did not notice. While Zucker happily twice cites my frank admission that I have only learned a fraction of Rashi's writings, I do not see it as relevant; what *is* important is that I have located all Rashi's comments concerning this topic (especially since, as a result of my article, many others engaged in this search as well). And while these Rishonim were sensitive to the issue of corporealism in general, they did not

---

*Demut, Tavnit*," p. 105; Ephraim Urbach in *Arugat HaBosem*, IV pp. 79-80, and Avraham Grossman in *Chachmei Tzorfat*, p. 413, who all endorse this reading of the *Machzor Vitri* passage. Furthermore, Dr. Kanarfogel also accepts this version as authoritative since recently he wrote "Rashi's approach [to anthropomorphism] was not entirely consistent, and at least one of his students, R. Jacob b. Samson, put forward a decidedly anthropomorphic view." See Ephraim Kanarfogel, "Anthropomorphism and Rationalist Modes of Thought in Medieval Ashkenaz: The Case of R. Yosef Bekhor Shor," Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook 8 (2009) p. 127.

ever set out to discover if Rashi was a corporealist. In order to do so, one would have to collect all of Rashi's comments from Tanakh and Chazal on this topic together and examine them simultaneously—a methodology of analyzing the works of Rishonim which would have been especially difficult in the days before printed books. I think it is obvious that prior to my article, nobody ever set out to perform such a systematic investigation. Furthermore, one who comes across Rashi's anti-anthropomorphic comments regarding God "resting" and the description of the "breath of His nostrils" would immediately assume that Rashi was polemicizing against corporealism, and would form the image of Rashi as a non-corporealist.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, does Zucker not realize that even great Torah scholars have their understanding of their revered predecessors influenced by their axiomatic theological presumptions? While most accepted Rambam's *Guide for the Perplexed* as standing in opposition to the kabbalistic approach, some interpreted it as concealing kabbalistic secrets,<sup>25</sup> and others held that parts or all of it must be a forgery.<sup>26</sup> Maharal was adamant that the Gemara's discussion of the sun's path at night must be referring to a metaphysical dimension, notwithstanding the fact that every single Rishon interpreted it as a discussion about astronomy and most understood it to be saying that the Chachmei Yisrael had a mistaken view.<sup>27</sup> With the study of Rashi itself, we see this phenomenon very strongly. Numerous commentators on Rashi understood his view of *tikkun sofrim* to mean that Chazal are simply explaining the text, and they dismissed Rashi's statement that Chazal actually changed the text as being a corruption inserted by later scribes—and yet the superior manuscript research available today indicates that this was indeed Rashi's view and was acknowledged as such by some of his earliest commentators.<sup>28</sup> And

---

<sup>24</sup> This appears to be exactly what happened with R. Asher b. Gershom—see p. 139 note 3 in R. Kanarfogel's article "Varieties of Belief in Medieval Ashkenaz."

<sup>25</sup> E.g. R. Avraham Abulafia, *Chaye HaNefesh*; R. Yaakov Leiner (Izbitzer), *Beis Yaakov*, introduction.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. R. Yaakov Emden, *Mitpachas Sofrim* (Lemberg, 1870), p. 56.

<sup>27</sup> I recently completed a lengthy study of this topic, which I plan to publish in the near future.

<sup>28</sup> See Avrohom Lieberman, "Tikkun Soferim, an Analysis of a Masoretic Phenomenon," *Hakirah* 5 (Fall 2007) pp. 231-233. Similarly, although

consider how R. Yosef Karo is shocked that Raavad would describe corporealists as greater and better people than Rambam, and therefore chooses an emended version of Raavad's comment.<sup>29</sup> Is it any surprise that even if Rashi had been a corporealist, committed non-corporealists would not have read him in that way?

Thus, as we have demonstrated, none of Zucker's arguments for Rashi not being a corporealist are adequate. Let us now address his proposed rebuttals of the various lines of evidence that Rashi was a corporealist.

### **Corporealism in Medieval France**

First of all, Zucker claims that I stated that corporealism was prevalent in France, based on the testimony of various Rishonim. If he takes "prevalent" to mean the majority, as he apparently does,<sup>30</sup> then his claim about me is factually untrue. What I said was that *according to some*, corporealism was the majority position in France, but I myself pointed out that R. Dr. Ephraim Kanarfogel has argued that most such evidence of anthropomorphic views amongst the medieval Torah scholars of France comes from detractors rather than people actually advocating such views, and therefore (he claims) it creates an exaggerated picture. I do not know whose view is correct, and I therefore would not categorically state that *most* French Torah scholars were corporealists. What the evidence does show is that corporealists did exist in significant numbers, and that some believed them to be the majority.

---

there is every indication that Rashi was of the view that Adam had actual intercourse with all the animals, and some of his early interpreters understood him that way, later interpreters universally considered such a reading to be not only incorrect but even unthinkable. See Eric Lawee, "The Reception of Rashi's Commentary on the Torah in Spain: The Case of Adam's Mating with the Animals," *JQR* 97:1 (Winter 2007) pp. 33–66, and especially idem, "From Sepharad to Ashkenaz: A Case Study in the Rashi Supercommentary Tradition," *AJS Review* 30:2 (2006) pp. 393–425.

<sup>29</sup> See note 15 above.

<sup>30</sup> In light of his usage of this term with regard to R. Shmuel ben Mordechai of Marseilles.

Zucker's position, on the other hand, is that it is "factually untrue" that corporealism was prevalent in France. Yet even by Zucker's arguments this is, of course, incorrect; absence of evidence that something is true does not present evidence that something is false. But in any case, there is considerable evidence that significant numbers of Torah scholars in France held corporealist views.

One of the earliest Jewish sources<sup>31</sup> regarding corporealism in France is R. Avraham ben HaRambam, who writes that he has been informed of "many" who lived overseas that interpret Scriptural and Talmudic anthropomorphisms literally.<sup>32</sup> He must surely be referring to Jews living in northern France and England.<sup>33</sup>

Another early testimony is from R. Shmuel ben Mordechai of Marseilles, who wrote that "the majority of the scholars in France were *magshimim*." We know virtually nothing about R. Shmuel ben Mordechai and have very little from him in writing, so there is nothing else to help us determine what he means by this.<sup>34</sup> It is theoretically possible that the word *magshimim* only meant those who met his strict definition of the term (such as those who believed God to possess emotions), and Zucker made a valuable contribution in raising this point. But how likely is it? The word "*magshim*," back then as well as today, is ordinarily taken to refer to someone who believes that

---

<sup>31</sup> With regard to testimony from non-Jewish sources, see Jose Faur, *The Horizontal Society* (Academic Studies Press 2008), vol. I, p. 308. and Aurbach, *Arugat Ha-Bosem*, vol. IV p. 78 n. 38.

<sup>32</sup> *Milchamos Hashem* (Ed. Reuven Margoliyis), p. 52. Zucker claims that R. Avraham ben HaRambam chided a zealous Maimonidean for inaccurately describing the French rabbis as corporealists (*Teshuvos Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam*, pp. 17-19). In fact, R. Avraham says nothing at all about the description of them as corporealists; he only rebukes the person for his anger and general nastiness.

<sup>33</sup> See Moshe Halbertal, *Bein Torah LaChochmah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press 2000), pp. 114, 125-6, where he discusses how the second Maimonidean Controversy of 1232-1235 was ignited precisely over the French rabbis' embracing of anthropomorphism.

<sup>34</sup> I am acceding to Rabbi Dr. Kanarfogel's request that both R. Zucker and I not include any statements from him that are not in his published works. 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.

God is corporeal. Furthermore, the description of French *magshimim* provided by R. Avraham ben HaRambam and others indicates that their opponent's position was that God actually possesses physical form. It is also noteworthy that Zucker leaps from the *possibility* that the word *magshim* has a narrower definition to the *definitive* statement that these people did *not* themselves maintain that God has a body. There is, of course, absolutely no basis whatsoever for reading such a position into R. Shmuel.

The next testimony comes from Ramban, writing to a group of Torah scholars in France, who expresses dismay at reports that they opposed Rambam for his belief that God is incorporeal.<sup>35</sup> Zucker points out that Ramban responded to them that anti-corporealist views are found in the writings of **Chachmei Tzorfes** (emphasis his), to show that French Torah scholars actually held otherwise, but Zucker neglects to mention that in fact Ramban only cites one such authority, R. Elazar of Worms. (Furthermore, Ephraim Urbach notes that the prime motivation which prompted Yehuda HaChasid and his disciple R. Elazar to publicly reveal their mystical approach to prayer was precisely to combat the anthropomorphism of their contemporaries.<sup>36</sup>) Zucker further claims that Ramban did not *know* these rabbis to be corporealist, but rather he was writing “**in case** the report was true” (emphasis his). However, it is important to note that Ramban himself writes no such qualification and there is no indication whatsoever that he did not believe the report; any attempt to portray it otherwise is a distortion. Following Ramban's report, Maharam Alashkar concludes that there were “*Gedolim b'chachmas haTalmud*” in France and other places who were corporealists, and notes that such errant beliefs were widespread until, thanks to Rambam's influence, they eventually became extinct.<sup>37</sup> If Ramban and Maharam Alashkar believed the report, what reason is there for Rabbi Zucker not to take it seriously and to dismiss it as “unconfirmed”? Zucker states that we do not know the names of these people nor their number. That is true, but it does not change the fact that it is certainly evidence for

---

<sup>35</sup> Zucker claims that I brought this to prove that Ramban believed the majority of French Torah scholars to be corporealists, but in fact I said nothing about Ramban believing this to be the majority view.

<sup>36</sup> Urbach, *Arugat Ha-Bosem* IV p. 74.

<sup>37</sup> *SHuT Maharam Alashkar* 117.

corporealists in France. In fact, as mentioned earlier, the motivation behind the dissemination of the commentary to Tefilah by R. Elazar of Worms was precisely to combat existing corporealist beliefs,<sup>38</sup> and Kanarfogel presents Ramban as seeing the **non-corporealist** position as a *minority* view.<sup>39</sup>

Then we have the statement of R. Meir b. Shimon of Narbonne (HaMeili, 1190-1263), the great halachist and colleague of Ramban. He describes the corporealist position as being not only the view of the masses, but also that of *chachamim gedolim* and *anashim chasidim*.<sup>40</sup> R. Meir b. Shimon describes these people as believing that God has a body and dwells in a heavenly domain distinct from the earth.

We then have various testimony from a variety of Rishonim, including Rambam, Raavad, Ibn Ezra, and Radak, as to the existence of corporealist views amongst Torah scholars, which Zucker dismisses in a footnote on the grounds that we do not know to whom they were referring, how many of them there were, nor the caliber of their stature as Torah scholars. Zucker makes much of the fact that these people are not named, but what difference does this make? And the fact that their quantity is unknown is not reason to relegate their existence to a footnote and effectively ignore them! If these corporealist Torah scholars were discussed by so many Rishonim, they were unlikely to have been a mere few aberrant individuals and therefore unimportant. Furthermore, it is certainly more likely that they lived in northern France rather than elsewhere. As for Zucker's claim that we do not know if they were of great stature, Urbach presents testimony of Haseidei Ashkenaz who incinerated "heretical" works composed by corporealists, indicating that these corporealists were obviously capable of producing Torah scholarship,<sup>41</sup> and we also have Ra'avad's statement that they were greater and better people than Rambam, Rambam's own admission that such people had a reputation as great Torah scholars, R. Meir b. Shimon's description of them as *chachamim gedolim* and Maharam Alashkar's description of them as *gedolim*

---

<sup>38</sup> See Ephraim Urbach, *Arugat Ha-Bosem* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim 1963) vol. IV pp. 74-81, and Ephraim Kanarfogel, "Varieties of Belief in Medieval Ashkenaz," p. 139 n. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Kanarfogel, p. 147 n. 37.

<sup>40</sup> See Halbertal, *Bein Torah LaChochmah*, p. 125.

<sup>41</sup> Urbach, *Arugat Ha-Bosem* vol. I: pp. 80-81.

*b'chachmas haTalmud*. Furthermore, since some of the known corporealists were rated as great Torah scholars, why should the unnamed ones have been any different?

Zucker then cites the study by Rabbi Dr. Ephraim Kanarfogel, although he fails to note that Kanarfogel himself concedes that his view is certainly contrary to the scholarly consensus on this issue.<sup>42</sup> He reports Kanarfogel as writing that “the total number of Torah scholars in northern France altogether who were corporealists was indeed quite small.” This is a false summary of Dr. Kanarfogel’s position, and this quotation is not found anywhere in his learned article. Zucker fails to realize that Kanarfogel’s study is not referring to the eleventh century, when Rashi lived, but instead to the Tosafist school of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Not only is virtually all of our information regarding corporealism from that latter period, but as R. Kanarfogel himself notes, much of the non-corporealist movement in that period can be attributed to the increasing influence of rationalism from Rambam and Spain.<sup>43</sup> The great authority on the medieval

---

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Rabbi Dr. Isadore Twersky, *Rabad of Posquieres*, p. 285, in reference to Ra’avad’s account of greater and better people than Rambam who were corporealists: “Literalism of this sort was evidently **widespread**. Maimonides himself was acquainted with Jews of unshakeable literalist persuasion, whom he condemned unqualifiedly. He reports that he encountered many prominent Talmudists some of whom were uncertain whether God possessed eyes, hands, and feet while others concluded categorically that God had a body with organs and senses... Younger contemporaries and immediate successors such as Nahmanides, David Kimhi, and Maimonides’ son Abraham also inform us of the **prevalence** of these beliefs” (emphasis added). Yisrael Ta-Shma writes similarly, including claiming that Rashi himself was a corporealist. Bernard Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition: The Career and Controversies of Ramah* (Cambridge, MA, 1982) p. 79, writes that “it seems likely that the views of Moses b. Hasdai (Taku) do approximate a significant body of Franco-German opinion.”

<sup>43</sup> See e.g. Kanarfogel’s description of non-Tosafist scholars in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries who were corporealists: “these scholars may have been less aware of Spanish and Sefardic (rationalistic) sources, as compared to those Ashkenazic authors who presented non-anthropomorphic views” (p. 138). See too Rabbi Dr. David Berger, “Jewish and General Culture in Medieval and Early Modern Times,” in *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures* (ed. J. J. Schachter, RIETS/

Jewish period, Yisrael Ta-Shma, likewise notes that, beginning in the twelfth century, the terminology in *piyyutim* describing God began to reflect the new anti-anthropomorphism.<sup>44</sup>

Zucker says that there were only three identifiable corporealist Torah scholars, none of whom was born until at least one-hundred years after Rashi's death. Zucker writes that "from this we may note that there were no known, identifiable corporealists among the Torah scholars of northern France during or before Rashi's lifetime." Of course, this is an incorrect inference; what he ought to say is that "from this we may note that *I do not know of any* other corporealists among the Torah scholars of northern France during or before Rashi's lifetime." In fact, Zucker has mis-identified one of them,<sup>45</sup>

---

Aaronson 1997) p. 94: "There can be little doubt that the driving force in the extirpation of the corporeal conception of God was the philosophic enterprise."

<sup>44</sup> Israel M. Ta-Shma, *Creativity and Tradition: Studies in Medieval Rabbinic Scholarship, Literature and Thought* (Harvard University Press 2006) p. 29. He also notes that no sign of this trend is found in Rashi. Zucker claims that Ashkenazi scholars had access to an early translation of R. Saadiah Gaon's anti-corporealist work *Emunos V'Deyos*, and that Rashi quoted from it in his commentary to Daniel. In fact, the source referenced by Zucker (Yosef Dan, *Torat HaSod Shel Chassidut Ashkenaz*, p. 23) states that there is debate as to whether this translation reached Europe before the twelfth century. Zucker claims that Rashi quotes from this translation, but in fact 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.

<sup>45</sup> Although Zucker writes that he performs "a careful review of the sources (i.e., checking the primary texts themselves) cited in chapter three of Shapiro's book," apparently part of his declared presentation of "a methodological approach as to how to examine and view any source," he has failed to carefully review the citation of the third corporealist in his list, R. Avraham b. Azriel. Had he done so, he would have realized that Shapiro's reference to Avraham b. Azriel, *Arugat HaBosem*, does not mean that the corporealist is R. Avraham b. Azriel himself, who as a disciple of R. Elazar of Worms, would not have been a corporealist. Nor did Zucker notice that Kanarfogel spends several pages ex-

and there are two others that should be added.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the fact that Zucker can only name three, based on *his* reading of Shapiro's book, does not mean that other corporealists are not and were not known to others. And it certainly does not mean that these are the only corporealists to have ever existed!

Zucker claims that because the three (actually five) identifiable corporealist Torah scholars all lived over a hundred years after Rashi's death, there is no reason to believe that the doctrine of corporealism existed during Rashi's lifetime. But he has it exactly backwards. There is every reason to believe that corporealism was *more* prevalent during Rashi's lifetime than a century later. We know that this belief gradually abated, and that this was largely due to the increasing influence of Rambam, until by the fourteenth century it had entirely disappeared. If it was declining during that period, then claiming that there was a small number at one point in that period does not mean that there were fewer before then; on the contrary, there would have been more adherents in the earlier period.

In fact, two of the three Rishonim that Zucker concedes as anthropomorphist explicitly state that their motivation for speaking out is precisely to combat the new-fangled heresy of philosophers who deny the corporeality of God; R. Moshe Taku refers to it as the "new

---

plicity discussing the fact that R. Avraham b. Azriel was not a corporealist. Apparently, Zucker misunderstood the reference in Shapiro's book. Shapiro references *Arguat HaBosem*, which is the title of the compilation of the writings of Avraham b. Azriel (edited by E. Urbach), but Shapiro's cited reference is to a starkly corporealist commentary on one of the *piyyutm* recited on *parshat Shekalim*, which Urbach includes as part of his compilation. Moshe Idel, writing in *Kabbalah* (2006) vol. 14 p. 77, refers to this text as "one of the most anthropomorphic passages found in the Middle Ages," and he identifies the commentator as R. Nechemiah b. Shlomo, the "*navi*" from Erfurt. Idel also identifies him as the probable author of the *Tefillot bein HaTekiyot* that is still incorporated in the *Rosh HaShana Machzor*. Incidentally, Shraga Abramson, in an article entitled "*Navi, Ro'eh veChozeh*" that appeared in *Sefer HaYovel LeKavot HaRav Mordechai Kirschblum* (Jerusalem 1983), pp. 117-139, notes that the Rishonim used the term *navi* exclusively for those considered truly great charismatic leaders.

<sup>46</sup> They are R. Yaakov b. Shimshon (discussed earlier) and R. Elchanan b. Yakar, both of whom are listed by R. Dr. Kanarfogel as having views similar to those of R. Moshe Taku.

wisdom and new religion,”<sup>47</sup> while R. Shlomo Simcha considers the new philosophical approach of allegorizing verses to be uprooting the faith.<sup>48</sup> They represent the traditional Ashkenazi belief system, restating the time-honored principles of their ancestors and resisting innovation. According to Zucker they would have to be the radical innovators coming up with a shockingly new corporealism unknown to their illustrious predecessors. What could possibly have misled them into this new and heretical belief, especially at precisely the time when the entire Jewish world was moving in the other direction and absorbing the philosophical perspective of Rambam and Sefarad? 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 that were imported from Spain.

In general, Zucker seems reluctant to accept the existence of corporealists in the medieval period beyond those that are utterly undeniable. He refers to the “testimony” of Ra’avad in quotation marks—but why does it require quotation marks? Ra’avad unequivocally speaks of greater and better people than Rambam who were corporealists, and is certain enough of this to use it to criticize Rambam for classifying such people as heretics.

Let us summarize: We know that corporealist Torah scholars existed in significant enough numbers to be a major concern for several Rishonim, we know from several Rishonim that these corporealists had reputations as being great Torah scholars, we have Ramban and Maharam Alashkar accepting the report that there were great Torah scholars in France who were corporealists, we have R. Meir of Narbonne saying that great scholars as well as the masses are corporealists, we have a report by R. Shmuel b. Mordechai that “most of the Torah scholars in France are *magshimim*,” we have evidence of a shift towards incorporealism in the twelfth century, and we have no claims whatsoever from that period that corporealists in France were in the minority. There is certainly sufficient evidence to say that corporealism was a significant enough phenomenon amongst Torah scholars

---

<sup>47</sup> *Kesav Tamim*, facsimile edition page 61=folio 31a, cited by Kanarfogel on p. 150, footnote 53.

<sup>48</sup> See Gad Freudenthal, “*Ha-Avir, Baruch Hu U’Baruch Shemo*,” *Daat* 32-33 pp. 194-195.

in France during the eleventh century that it is entirely feasible that Rashi was part of that group. It is also correct to state, as I did, that according to the claims of some, it is statistically likely that Rashi was part of this group, while others would disagree. Unfortunately, it is also clear that many who are uncomfortable with the idea of Rashi being a corporealist do not fully accept the historic reality that there were great Torah scholars who were corporealists, for understandable (if incorrect) reasons.<sup>49</sup>

### **The Argument from Silence**

My first set of arguments for Rashi being a corporealist was regarding the silence of Rashi regarding Scriptural descriptions of God's arm, hand, finger, back, face, eyes, and feet. This silence is conspicuous in light of his emphasis explaining other types of anthropomorphisms, such as those describing God as resting and as having breath emerging from His nostrils, as being non-literal, and it is also conspicuous in light of the need that other Rishonim saw in explaining such corporeal descriptions as being non-literal, which would be all the more important in France. I proposed the simple explanation that the reason why Rashi did not describe these corporeal descriptions as being non-literal was that he did not in fact see such corporeal descriptions as being non-literal. It was only descriptions of God needing to rest, and as having breath emerging from His nostrils (which is only a feature of flesh-and-blood beings), which are to be understood non-literally.

Zucker first claims that arguments from silence are fallacious, but then admits that this is not actually true; they are only fallacious when there are other good reasons for explaining the silence.<sup>50</sup> In the case

---

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Rabbi Dr. David Berger, "Jewish and General Culture in Medieval and Early Modern Times," p. 94: "The philosophers, in fact, did their job so well that contemporary Jews find it very difficult to acknowledge the existence of medieval Jewish anthropomorphism despite substantial, credible evidence."

<sup>50</sup> For example, on several occasions, Zucker writes that he presented an argument on my website and "Rabbi Slifkin did not respond." I do not know if he means to argue that this was because I did not have a response, but if he does, then this would be an example of a fallacious argument from silence. There was a perfectly valid reason why I did not

of Rashi, there would have to be a different and reasonable explanation for the pattern in Rashi's non-literal explanations that works in all cases—i.e., which explains why he does interpret certain types of anthropomorphisms non-literally and why he is silent about the kind that describe God as possessing a body. Is there such an explanation? Zucker proposes that one might think that the biblical metaphors about God that have an imagery that suggests weakness from a human perspective are unfit to be attributed to God, even as metaphors, and therefore Rashi explains that in these cases, the Torah nevertheless saw fit to use such metaphors.

But this suggestion fails on several counts. First, it does not account for the cases where Rashi does *not* present a non-literal explanation of corporeal descriptions. How could Rashi allow his readers to take it for granted that such anthropomorphic expressions are non-literal? Even those Rishonim who lived in the more philosophically advanced region of Sepharad could not take this for granted, and strove to explain how such verses should not be interpreted literally. How could Rashi, who lived in the less philosophically advanced region of France, where there were corporealists, possibly take it for granted that his readers would understand these verses non-literally? Does Zucker actually think that Rashi fulfilled his duty in this regard by adding “is there a ‘right’ before God”? Consider the verse describing man being made in God's image (*Bereishis* 1:27). Nearly every Rishon (including some who lived only a short time after Rashi), as well as early Acharonim make certain to explain this in a non-corporealist manner; Rambam had to devote a large portion of his *Guide for the Perplexed* to explaining this topic. Yet Rashi, who leads his readers through the basic understanding of the text, phrase by phrase, simply explains that man was made in the *dmus deyokno*—the image of the appearance—of God. Rashi gives no elaboration, and his comment not only does not prevent corporealism, but instead points in its di-

---

respond, and I gave it, although Zucker did not mention this. The reason was that, unlike a print publication, a debate on the Internet has no defined limits. After several weeks of endless back-and-forth it became clear to me that the arguments would go on forever; the only way to end it would be for me to pull out. So my eventual lack of response is certainly not any argument that I did not have anything to respond—I indeed did have responses, which are now presented in this article.

rection!<sup>51</sup> And consider all the blatantly anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Talmud, which Rishonim such as Rabbeinu Chananel emphasized (at length) should not be interpreted literally. How could Rashi, with his method of elucidation, and given his environment, be the one to risk this most terrible of misunderstandings?! The obvious answer is that he did not consider it to be a misunderstanding.

Second, Zucker's explanation does not account for all the cases where Rashi does explain anthropomorphisms non-literally. In the case of the breath of God's nostrils," which appears in both *Shemos* 15:8 and *Devarim* 29:19, Rashi employs his non-literal interpretation. In footnote 28, Zucker refers to this anthropomorphism as speaking of God's "shortness of breath," claiming that it is likewise an imagery with a connotation of weakness. But the verse in *Devarim* 29:19 says nothing about God being "short of breath"; it speaks of Him smoking with anger! This is not at all a description of weakness; in fact, it occurs in a context of discussing God's powerful rage. And when we look at the verse in *Shemos* 15:8, in the context of describing God's tremendous power in the Splitting of the Red Sea, Zucker's explanation becomes positively ludicrous. Moshe speaks about how God is a mighty warrior, destroying the Egyptians in the sea; he states that His hand is glorified with strength, and that He shattered the Egyptians with abundant grandeur—"and with the wind of Your nostrils, You caused the waters to pile up." This is obviously not a weakness-connoting description of God being short of breath!<sup>52</sup>

Third, there is a case where Rashi himself chooses to interpret anthropomorphisms in a way that implies weakness on the part of God, without making any comment about it being non-literal. The Talmud in *Sanhedrin* 98b speaks of "the possessor of all might"

---

<sup>51</sup> This comment of Rashi also serves to answer another challenge that I heard to my hypothesis: if Rashi was a corporealist, why doesn't he ever say straight out that God has human form? The answer is that first of all, he didn't need to, as the Torah does so, and second, he actually does so—right here.

<sup>52</sup> Rashi there does refer to another verse, in *Yeshayah* 48, which correlates great anger with being short of breath. But this is not presented in any way as an explanation of the description of anger in this verse; instead, Rashi uses his explanation in this verse as a launching point to discuss related expressions in other verses.

clutching his loins in distress; Rabbi Meir Abulafia explains this as referring to mighty humans, and states that the one who explains otherwise is destined to stand in judgment for it. As Hacham Yosef Chai in *Ben Yebovada* points out, he is referring to Rashi, who explains the Talmud as referring to God.

Thus, Zucker's suggested "eminently reasonable" explanation of the pattern in Rashi is not only not eminently reasonable, it is utterly *unreasonable* and simply does not work. In the absence of any other explanation for the extremely peculiar pattern in Rashi—and many people have tried with great effort and ingenuity to come up with one—the sole viable candidate on the table must be taken seriously.

### Onkelos' Euphemisms

Another piece of evidence for Rashi being a corporealist is his explanation of Onkelos' interpretation of the verse describing God protecting Moses with His hand, which Onkelos changes to God protecting Moses with His word. Rashi's view is that Onkelos is using a euphemism (*kinnuy*), and I pointed out that this means that in Rashi's view, the true meaning of the verse is in its literal interpretation. Zucker admits that Rashi sees Onkelos as using a metaphor, but claims that the Torah is *also* using a metaphor. In other words, according to Zucker, while the Torah saw fit to use a metaphor, Onkelos did not want to use that metaphor, and instead gives his own metaphor.

But if Rashi did not understand God as actually using a hand, and it was in fact God's word that protected Moses, then Onkelos is not giving a metaphor—he is giving the literal account of events! Yet Rashi clearly understood Onkelos as giving a metaphor, as Zucker himself agrees, and thus this interpretation is untenable. And if one were to claim that it is still a metaphor, albeit a vastly more refined one, to speak of God protecting Moses with His "word," since God does not actually use words, it is still not something that would be described as Onkelos using a *kinnuy* out of concern for God's honor. Rashi's description of Onkelos "using a *kinnuy* out of respect, because God does not need to use His hand," means that Onkelos, out of respect, used a word that is *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* for "hand."

We are left with the question of whether Rashi was saying that God “does not need” or “should not need” to use His hand, and the meaning of whichever translation is correct. This is a valid question, with possibilities in both directions,<sup>53</sup> but it does not change the fact that, according to Rashi, Onkelos was using a euphemism out of respect, and therefore the Torah’s account of God using His hand was itself not a metaphor.

### God’s Movements

We then move to the account of God descending to see the Tower of Babylon, on which Rashi states that “There was no need for this, but it was to teach judges that they should not convict the defendant until they see and understand [the situation].” Rashi seems to mean that God actually descended in order to teach this lesson. Zucker claims that Rashi could mean instead that there was no need for the Torah to employ the metaphor of God’s descent to *Bavel*. Zucker claims that there is “no more inherent weight to the former interpretation than there is to the latter,” but of course there is—the latter requires inserting words that are not there!<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, Zucker misses my point that Onkelos and other Rishonim were concerned that one may interpret God’s descent literally, and yet Rashi evinces no such concern.

---

<sup>53</sup> Zucker rejects the possibility that Rashi means that God chose to do so, as if so, Rashi should see this euphemism as being implemented on every occasion that the Torah speaks of God’s physical intervention. Yet an approach along the lines of Zucker’s own understanding of this Rashi works well here—that such euphemisms are only used in the potentially disrespectful cases of God having to absorb the blows of harmful forces. Zucker also rejects the possibility that God had to use His hand, for what he claims to be logical reasons, but which are in fact *theological* reasons that may not be shared by a corporealist.

<sup>54</sup> Zucker notes in a footnote that *ba lamed* always refers to the *passuk*, not to God, and in this he is quite correct, but there is no reason to accept that there is one subject for both verbs “*butzrakh*” and “*ba lellammed*,” and even if there is, this is not in any way an implication that the *passuk* is using a metaphor; Rashi reads quite easily as stating that “and God descended—this was not necessary, but the *passuk* comes to teach...” or “it was not necessary for the verse to relate this...”

With regard to Rashi translating *pasach* as “passed over” rather than “had compassion,” Zucker points out that there are also non-corporealists who translate it that way, and therefore Rashi’s translation is not, in and of itself, evidence for his being a corporealist; Zucker therefore concludes that my argument is specious. Were that indeed to have been my argument, he would be correct. But what I actually pointed out was that it is 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, and that this is all the more conspicuous here when he is stating that he prefers the corporeal translation to the non-corporeal translation.

### **The Hanging Corpse Resembling God**

An additional piece of evidence in favor of Rashi being a corporealist is his comment on the Talmudic parable explaining why a corpse may not be left hanging. The Talmud compares it to a king who did not allow his brother, sentenced to death for banditry, to receive his due punishment of death by hanging, because of the physical resemblance between the living king and the corpse of his brother. While several authorities take pains to explain this in a way that avoids the obvious anthropomorphic implications, Rashi simply states that man is “like-wise made in the appearance (*dyukno*) of his Creator.” Zucker cites R. Yeshayah de Tranni who explains that Rashi should be read as follows: “The corpse should not be left hanging, because it looks like God is hanging, since man is made in the physical appearance of God [according to the appearance that God has when He appears in visions as a man].” But in my original article, I acknowledged that it is possible to contrive different readings of Rashi. The point is what is the most reasonable way of reading Rashi—the way in which we would read Rashi if we did not have a prior conviction that he couldn’t possibly be a corporealist? R. Yeshayah de Trani’s interpretation is certainly awkward and requires inserting a lengthy parenthetical explanation—which is probably why others avoided it.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> R. Yeshayah de Trani’s interpretation is also complicated by the fact that Rashi, unlike a long list of authorities from Saadia Gaon to the Chasidei Ashkenaz, never invokes the mechanism of God sending righteous men a vision of an anthropoid entity.

Zucker goes on to note that R. Yehoshua ibn Shuiv, a known incorporealist, also discusses Rashi's usage of the term *dyukan* and explains it in a non-corporeal way in which *dyukan* refers to the body's reflection of the soul. The same difficulties with R. Yeshayah de Tranni's explanation apply here. Furthermore, what Zucker fails to note is that Ibn Shuiv's explanation completely contradicts R. Yeshayah de Tranni's explanation. If Rashi was so clearly not giving a corporeal explanation, how could they not agree as to what he was actually saying? In fact, the most likely explanation as to why they have such radically different explanations is that they are both inserting their own views into Rashi, not drawing Rashi's view out of his words; additionally, they may both have realized the problems with the others' interpretation.<sup>56</sup>

### **The Loss of the Divine Image in the Decomposing Face**

Another piece of evidence for Rashi's corporealism is his comments on the Talmud's statement that a mourner overturns his bed to denote how mortality was brought about by the sin of Adam, which overturned (corrupted) man's Divine image. I pointed out that an incorporealist would explain the corruption of the Divine image as being the sin itself, which corrupts man's soul, and yet Rashi interprets the deceased's loss of the image of God as referring to his *facial decomposition*.

Zucker claims that Rashi is providing a link from the overturning of the bed to the overturning of the *tzelem Elokim* (in its spiritual sense), and that this link is that the face has been overturned by decomposing. But my point was that no link is needed. As the Gemara says, the overturning of the bed is intended to commemorate man's

---

<sup>56</sup> Zucker is apparently shocked that I could claim that my interpretation is preferable over that of De Tranni and Ibn Shuiv, pointing out that I have studied less of Rashi's commentary than they did. I already noted why this is irrelevant, since they did not focus on the question of whether Rashi was a corporealist and examine all of his statements on the topic in that light. If Zucker is asking how could a contemporary writer possibly claim to know how to read a Rashi better than a Rishon, one might as well simply ask how could a contemporary writer possibly accuse a Rishon of being a corporealist, and be done with it!

overturning of the Divine image (which with the incorporealist view refers to his spiritual corruption), and it directly does so. That was the entire point of this piece of evidence—with the incorporealist view, there is no need whatsoever to mention the face decomposing. The fact that Rashi mentions it indicates that he held this to be the *meaning* of man having his divine image corrupted.

### God's Two Eyes

We then have the halachic requirement that only a person with vision in both eyes is obligated to engage in the festival pilgrimage and be seen before God. The Gemara's explanation of the basis for this requirement is a little ambiguous, but Rashi (in *Chagigah*) explains it as meaning that he must have two eyes just as God has two eyes. Zucker invokes R. Meir Abulafia's explanation that when the Gemara speaks of God's two eyes, it means that He has complete vision. But, again, Zucker has missed the point. I myself cited R. Meir Abulafia's explanation; of course it is *possible* to insert a metaphorical meaning into the Gemara, just as a committed non-corporealist will do with virtually any statement that implies a corporeal view. But we see no hint of that in Rashi. R. Meir Abulafia felt the need to clarify that there is a metaphorical meaning here, and Rambam gave an entirely different exegesis altogether. Why didn't Rashi, who sets out to help us with difficulties in the text, see fit to address this problem? How could Rashi, living in France, take for granted that which those in the more philosophically advanced region of Spain could not take for granted—especially since elsewhere, we see that Rashi was concerned about certain types of anthropomorphisms! Based on this Rashi alone, the most likely explanation is that Rashi didn't think that there was a problem to be addressed.

Zucker claims we can perhaps see an allusion to Rashi having the same view as R. Abulafia in Rashi elsewhere, in *Sanbedrin* 4a, where he mentions that God is “complete.” But this is ruled out when we look at yet another Rashi, in *Erechin* 2b, where he states that God is “complete, with two eyes,” which is entirely inconsistent with R. Abulafia's approach. The point of R. Abulafia's approach is that saying God has two eyes *means that* He is complete, or to put it another way, that God is complete and this is *equivalent* in a human to having two eyes; not that God is complete *in that* He has two eyes!

## The Image of God

Finally, let us return to one of the first points that we raised—Zucker's claim that we should expect to find Rashi discussing God's incorporeality in his commentary to a verse in *Yeshayah*. In fact, surely the pivotal source for any discussion about whether God is corporeal is the description of man being created in the image of God. Elsewhere, Zucker claims that Rashi's explanation of man being created in God's image is with regard to "understanding and wisdom," referring the reader to Rashi to *Bereishis* 1:26. But this is incorrect. Rashi's comments to that verse only give us his explanation of *demus*, not *tzelem*. *Tzelem* is defined by Rashi in his commentary on the next verse, *Bereishis* 1:27, and he defines it as *tzelem dyukon yotzro*.

In my original article, I claimed that this is not evidence for Rashi being a corporealist, since the Gemara itself uses this phrase. What I failed to realize is that Rashi in many places defines what this phrase means, according to his understanding. Rashi uses the word *dyukon* on many occasions in his commentary on the Talmud and the context of these cases makes it absolutely clear that he takes the word to refer to the physical appearance of someone or something.<sup>57</sup> A person committed to the idea that Rashi was not a corporealist will say that Rashi meant the physical appearance of God according to the image that He presents when He appears in visions, or some other such contrivance. But if Rashi was using some novel understanding of the term or adding some critical modification here, in the most important of all his usages of the term, he would surely say so, rather than being incredibly and dangerously misleading. The reasonable conclusion is that he was using the term in the same way that he always uses it.

## Conclusion

Zucker's argument that Rashi was definitely not a corporealist based on his comments regarding God's right and left is interesting and potentially powerful. However, while it is a factor in the overall analysis, it involves its own difficulties, and it cannot be said to be conclusive;

---

<sup>57</sup> See Rashi to *Shabbos* 149a, s.v. *ketav hamehalech*; *Bava Metz'ia* 115a s.v. *deyuknaos*, *Sanhedrin* 63b s.v. *marivim*, *Sanhedrin* 66b s.v. *demus dyokno*, and *Sanhedrin* 104b s.v. *radaf*.

we cannot be certain what Rashi said or what he meant. Zucker's other arguments are either based on misunderstandings or are based on inserting non-existent words into Rashi's commentary. Rashi simply does not say that it is impossible for God to walk. The fact that other Rishonim held Rashi in high regard does not mean that they did not consider him to be a corporealist; and even if they did, this is entirely to be expected and is thus of no significance. Zucker's claim that there were hardly any corporealists in Rashi's time is unsupported by any evidence at all; on the contrary, the evidence points to there being a substantial number of them. Rashi's comments about the Jewish People seeing the seven firmaments have nothing to do with God being incorporeal, since He does not inhabit that realm; in fact, Rashi's comments show that he viewed the firmaments as being a physical realm and deities as corporeal beings. It also seems clear that Rashi viewed God as being located spatially above the physical firmament; this is a new piece of evidence for Rashi being a corporealist. And Rashi defines man being created in the image of God as man being created in His physical appearance.

Zucker also failed to harm the five categories of evidence for Rashi's corporealist view that I brought in my original article.<sup>58</sup> Rashi's silence about corporeal descriptions, in light of his non-literal interpretations of other types of anthropomorphisms, and in light of the extensive efforts of other Rishonim to explain away such descriptions, is still a striking anomaly for which the only viable explanation on the table is that Rashi held them to be literally true. Zucker's claim to have an eminently reasonable alternative requires the eminently unreasonable step of interpreting the magnificent praises of *Shiras HaYam* as implying weakness on God's part. Likewise, the evidence

---

<sup>58</sup> It should also be noted that some fascinating further arguments for Rashi's corporealism in some handwritten journals by Yitzchak Shmuel Reggio ("YaSHaR," 1784-1855) have just emerged online at <<http://www.kb.dk/manus/judsam/2009/sep/dsh/en>>. In several places, such as *Zichronot* p. 4 (p. 2 in the manuscript pagination), and p. 14 (p. 7 in the manuscript), Reggio presents arguments that Rashi was a corporealist, and while many will not see Reggio as a Jew in good standing, his observations should certainly be considered on their own merits. However, personally I think that while there is considerable merit to his arguments, they are not adequately decisive, and I am therefore not reproducing them here.

from Rashi presenting Onkelos' interpretations as euphemisms rather than clarifications, from Rashi speaking of God's movements with no concern for the implications, from his statements about a hanging corpse resembling God, from his description of man's loss of the divine image in death referring to his facial decomposition, and from his reference to God's two eyes, all point to his being a corporealist; Zucker's creative reinterpretations have no basis in Rashi, do not fit well with his words, and are unreasonable in the context of Rashi's discussions. To put it another way: 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.

We are told by the Rishonim that there were numerous Torah scholars in medieval France who were corporealists. The overall picture overwhelmingly points towards Rashi being the sort of Torah scholar to whom they referred.<sup>59</sup> At the end of the day, however, the significant point is not whether Rashi himself was a corporealist, but rather that there were most definitely great Torah scholars, Rishonim, that were corporealists. It is this that presents a major difficulty for many people, and it is this which I address in my other article in this volume. ❧

*I would like to thank Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Sprecher for his expert assistance with this article.*

---

<sup>59</sup> I do not understand why Zucker adds a postscript stating that the purpose of his article, aside from the topic of corporealism, is to present a "methodological approach" as to how to examine sources, and nor does he explain what this "methodological approach" actually is. It goes without saying that in a debate, each person believes that he has taken the correct approach to the sources, and that his opponent has not done so, and it therefore seems meaningless to present this claim about oneself.