

No, Rashi Was Not a Corporealist

By: SAUL ZUCKER

In his article *Was Rashi a Corporealist?*¹ Rabbi Natan Slifkin presented what he purports to be “a powerful case”² that Rashi was a corporealist. He posted the article on his website <www.rationalistjudaism.com>, inviting comments and critique. The ensuing discussion on the website³ provides an expanded and clarified view of Rabbi Slifkin’s position as delineated in his article, and is thus a valuable resource to fully understand his argument. In the course of this article I shall make reference both to Slifkin’s article and to posts on his website, in order to examine his claims.

An analysis of Slifkin’s article shows that his entire argument, including the five principal subdivisions of “evidence” for Rashi’s corporealism, rests on four basic premises. They are as follows:

[1] Corporealism was prevalent among the Torah scholars of northern France during the time of Rashi.⁴

[2] “From the fact that [Rashi] takes pains to stress [the non-literal understanding of biblical anthropomorphisms] in certain instances, the glaring omission in others leads to the conclusion that he interpreted such anthropomorphisms literally.”⁵

¹ *Hakirah, The Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought*, volume 7, winter 2009, pp. 81–105.

² Slifkin, p. 104.

³ The threads of the website posts are entitled “Was Rashi a Corporealist?” “Hanging Corpses and Decomposing Faces,” “Seeing No Image,” “Corporealism Redux, part I,” “Academic vs. Traditionalist Studies,” “Corporealism Redux, part II,” “As It Were, So To Speak,” “Arguing with Creationists and Other Biases,” and “My Latest Mistake.” A copy of the nine threads and all of the comments may be found as well on the website <www.corporealismdiscussion.com>.

⁴ Slifkin uses this premise in his arguments on pp. 83, 103, 104.

⁵ Slifkin, p. 93. This is the thrust of Slifkin’s “Evidence #1: The Conspicuous Absence,” pp. 91–94, and part of his “Evidence #3: Descent

[3] Rashi's "euphemisms" about certain biblical anthropomorphisms, i.e., regarding God's covering Moshe with His hand and God's carrying Israel on the wings of vultures, imply that the truth lies in a literal understanding of the biblical verse.⁶ Similarly, Rashi's language about certain biblical anthropomorphisms, i.e., regarding God's descent to *Bavel* and God's passing over the homes of *bnei Yisrael* in *Mitzrayim*, implies that the truth lies in a literal understanding of the biblical verse.⁷

[4] Rashi's comments about various Talmudic anthropomorphisms imply that he understood them literally.⁸

Let us now proceed to examine each of these premises, with an eye toward factual accuracy and logical analysis.

The First Premise

Slifkin's claim that corporealism was prevalent among the Torah scholars of northern France rests largely upon the "testimony" of R. Shemuel ben Mordekhai of Marseilles and Ramban,⁹ and, to a lesser degree, upon the "testimony" of others such as Ra'avah, R. Yeshayah deTrani, and others quoted in Dr. Marc Shapiro's *The Limits of Orthodox Theology*, chapter three.¹⁰ Slifkin cites R. Shemuel ben Mordekhai of Marseilles' manuscript from an article written by Ephraim Kanarfogel.¹¹ Over the course of the website discussion, Rabbi Dr. Kanarfogel was asked about R. Shemuel's view, and he stated that based upon his close reading and study of the manuscript and his knowledge of the history and context of the period, R. Shemuel's quote that "*rov chakhmei tzorfas magshimim*" means only that from R. She-

to Babylon and Egypt," p. 97, and part of his "Evidence #4: Talmudic Anthropomorphism," p. 99.

⁶ This is the thrust of Slifkin's "Evidence #2: Euphemisms Rather Than Clarifications," pp. 94–96.

⁷ This is part of Slifkin's "Evidence #3: Descent to Babylon and Egypt," pp. 96–97.

⁸ This is the thrust of Slifkin's "Evidence #4: Talmudic Anthropomorphisms" and "Evidence #5: The Decomposing Face," pp. 99–102.

⁹ Slifkin, p. 83.

¹⁰ Slifkin, pp. 81–82.

¹¹ Slifkin, p. 82, footnote 6.