

## *No, Rashi Was Not a Corporealism*

**By: SAUL ZUCKER**

In his article *Was Rashi a Corporealist?*<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Natan Slifkin presented what he purports to be “a powerful case”<sup>2</sup> that Rashi was a corporealist. He posted the article on his website <[www.rationalistjudaism.com](http://www.rationalistjudaism.com)>, inviting comments and critique. The ensuing discussion on the website<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>
- [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.”<sup>5</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> Slifkin, p. 104.

<sup>3</sup> 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](http://www.corporealismdiscussion.com)>.

<sup>4</sup> Slifkin uses this premise in his arguments on pp. 83, 103, 104.

<sup>5</sup> 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

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Saul Zucker lives in Teaneck, New Jersey

[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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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

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,<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> Slifkin cites R. Shemuel ben Mordekhai of Marseilles' manuscript from an article written by Ephraim Kanarfogel.<sup>11</sup> 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-

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

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

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

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

<sup>9</sup> Slifkin, p. 83.

<sup>10</sup> Slifkin, pp. 81–82.

<sup>11</sup> Slifkin, p. 82, footnote 6.

muel's own perspective as a staunch Maimonidean, the views of most of the Torah scholars of France would be considered corporealism; it does **not** mean that R. Shemuel was reporting that these scholars maintained that God has a body.<sup>12 13</sup> (The objective of Slifkin's claim is to posit that there was a prevalence of Torah scholars who maintained that God has a body, in order to demonstrate that Rashi fit in with other like-minded Torah scholars of his milieu. This objective is not met at all, insofar as these Torah scholars of France were merely labeled as corporealists by staunch Maimonideans, but did not themselves maintain that God has a body.) Kanarfogel confirmed in writing that this was his assessment of R. Shemuel's view,<sup>14</sup> and Slifkin then retracted his claim with regard to R. Shmuel's quote as evidence for the prevalence of corporealism among the Torah scholars of northern France. Slifkin, however, later reversed his retraction,<sup>15</sup> claiming that Kanarfogel was not clarifying R. Shemuel's position, but rather was arguing with it, Kanarfogel's own words about the matter notwithstanding (!)

With regard to Ramban's "testimony," Slifkin infers that since Ramban wrote to some French rabbis, addressing their alleged corporealism and demonstrating to them that corporealism is false, he (Ramban) knew these rabbis to be corporealists, and that they represented the ideology of a majority of their colleagues.<sup>16</sup> A careful read-

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<sup>12</sup> So, for example, if one were to maintain that God does not have a body but that He does have emotions, a Maimonidean would identify him as a corporealist, despite the former's belief that, indeed, God does not have a body.

<sup>13</sup> A corollary of this case (although not the exact same case) can be found in the responsa of R. Avraham ben HaRambam. He speaks of a fervent Maimonidean who, in his misguided zeal, had described the French rabbis as corporealists. R. Avraham chides the zealous Maimonidean for writing in anger and thereby not being accurate in his description. See A. H. Freimann and S. D. Goitein eds., *Teshuvos Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam* (Jerusalem: *Mekitze Nirdamim* 1937), pp. 17–19.

<sup>14</sup> Cited on the website thread "Seeing No Image" August 5, 2009, 3:09 pm.

<sup>15</sup> See the website thread "Seeing No Image" August 5, 2009, 5:45 pm.

<sup>16</sup> See Slifkin, p. 82.

ing of Ramban,<sup>17</sup> however, reveals that in writing to an unspecified number of French rabbis (ten? one hundred? two?), Ramban says that he heard a report from some unnamed people that the addressees had criticized Rambam for writing in the *Mishneh Torah* that God has no form or image. Addressing this issue **in case** the report he had heard was true, Ramban strongly emphasized that the doctrine of incorporealism is to be found throughout the Bible and the *midrashim*, and he even mentioned that it is to be found “in the writings of *chakbmei tzorfes* as well.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, Slifkin presents an unconfirmed report about an unspecified number of unnamed rabbis as “evidence” of the prevalence of corporealism among the Torah scholars in northern France.

Finally, a careful review of the sources (i.e., checking the primary texts themselves) cited in chapter three of Shapiro’s book reveals that the known, identifiable corporealists among the Torah scholars of northern France during the entire period of the *rishonim* were three people,<sup>19</sup> none of whom was born until at least one hundred years after Rashi’s death.<sup>20</sup> The amorphous “unknowns”<sup>21</sup> can be as few as

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<sup>17</sup> C. Chavel, ed., *Kisvei Ramban* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook 1963), volume I, pp. 345–348.

<sup>18</sup> *Kisvei Ramban*, volume I, p. 346.

<sup>19</sup> They were R. Moshe Taku, R. Shelomo Simchah of Troyes, and R. Avraham ben ‘Azriel. Shapiro (p. 58) cited Martin Lockshin who theorized that Rashbam, as well, was a corporealist, based upon the latter’s comments on *Bereishis* 48:8; Lockshin’s theory, however, is negated by Rashbam’s comments on *Bereishis* 1:26, as Shapiro points out in his footnote number 70. Shapiro (p. 59) also theorized that Maharil may have been a corporealist, based upon a *teshuvah* of the latter. Shapiro notes that this corporealism may be inferred from one variant manuscript of the *teshuvah*. Even there, however, the inferred corporealism is subject to interpretation; Shapiro introduced Maharil only tentatively (“An anthropomorphic conception of God would also appear to be behind...”).

<sup>20</sup> 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. On this whole issue in general, see the website thread “Hanging Corpses and Decomposing Faces” July 29, 2009, 7:42 pm.

<sup>21</sup> Aside from the three specified corporealists, the remaining sources cited by Shapiro in his third chapter are general statements by incorpo-

five or six, or as many as one would like to speculate, and therefore, cannot be cited as evidentiary with regard to a claim of “**prevalence**.” In fact, Kanarfogel has written that, based upon various textual and historical considerations, there was a marked difference between the less knowledgeable laity, who may well have had numbers of corporealists among them, versus the Torah scholars, since the total number of Torah scholars in northern France altogether who were corporealists was indeed quite small.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the first premise, regarding the “prevalence” of corporealism among the Torah scholars of northern France, has been shown to be factually untrue.

### The Second Premise

Slifkin’s second premise, what he calls “conspicuous absence,”<sup>23</sup> is known in the academic world of pure reasoning as *argumentum ex silentio*, and is classified in that world as a fallacy. Nevertheless, in certain circumstances of applied reasoning it may be used as a valid form of abduction, although in those cases, the standard to qualify as proof or evidence is relatively high. That is, the silence must be shown to be attributable overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, to the reason claimed by the argument; if there is a different, valid reason that can explain the silence, then the standard of proof for the *argumentum ex silentio* has not been met.<sup>24</sup>

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realists who mention the existence of unspecified and unnamed corporealist scholars. It is worth noting that without knowing the specific identities of these corporealist scholars, it is difficult to determine not only how many or how few people were involved, but also what the incorporealist authors meant when they used the term “scholar”—were they speaking of the scholarly elite, i.e., people of great stature akin to that of the “*risbonim*,” or were they speaking of local communal rabbinic leaders?

<sup>22</sup> “Varieties of Belief in Medieval Ashkenaz: The Case of Anthropomorphism,” Daniel Frank and Matt Goldish eds., *Rabbinic Culture and Its Critics: Jewish Authority, Dissent, and Heresy in Medieval and Early Modern Times* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Slifkin, p. 91.

<sup>24</sup> On this entire issue, see D. Walton, *Arguments from Ignorance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press 1996), especially chapters 1–3, 7.

Slifkin's argument here is as follows: "Rashi employs the method of non-literal interpretation in order to avoid a specific class of anthropomorphism: the portrayal of God as being subject to exhaustion, physical toil, or being secondary in power to His creations... Yet with the multitude of verses describing God as possessing bodily form, he does not raise this principle [of non-literal interpretation]. Scripture speaks of God's arm, hand, finger, back, face, eyes, and feet, and Rashi does not comment that Scripture is speaking 'as it were' in order to 'direct the ear'... 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."<sup>25</sup>

But is Slifkin's conclusion as to Rashi's silence definitive, or even probable? If a different, valid and comprehensive conclusion can be proposed as to Rashi's selectivity and silence in commenting on the Torah's anthropomorphisms, then Slifkin's *argumentum ex silentio* completely falls apart, even as a form of abductive reasoning. I ask the reader to bear with me here as I present a different, valid and comprehensive conclusion as to Rashi's selectivity and silence. In so doing, I must emphasize that I propose this merely as a **possible** conclusion; but that alone is sufficient to negate the validity of Slifkin's argument.

The Talmud reports that we know that Moshe and Aharon died via a divine "kiss," from the Torah's statement in each case that the death was "*al pi HaShem*," and we know from a *gezairah shavah*, derived from Moshe, that Miriam, too, died via a divine "kiss."<sup>26</sup> The reason that the Torah does not state "*al pi HaShem*" with regard to Miriam, explains the Talmud, is "*she-genai ha-davar lomar*," or as Rashi explains,<sup>27</sup> "*eino derekh kavod shel ma'alab*" (it would not be respectful to speak of God in those terms). All incorporealists must, by definition, learn that the "kiss" mentioned in this passage in the Talmud is allegorical. And yet, the Torah does not mention in an outright manner even the allegory, as it concerns Miriam. There are certain allego-

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<sup>25</sup> Slifkin, pp. 91, 92, 93.

<sup>26</sup> *Bava Basra* 17a.

<sup>27</sup> In his commentary on *Bemidbar* 20:1.

ries that, because of their imagery, are unfit to be attributed to God, even as a metaphor.

With this lesson in mind, let us posit the following about Rashi's selectivity in his comments. Perhaps we would have thought 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. Therefore, Rashi explains that in these cases,<sup>28</sup> the Torah nevertheless saw fit to present these images "to direct the ear" in order to convey a lesson that human beings would be able to understand from within their own perspective.

If this is so, then Rashi's silence in other, non-weakness imagery does not at all imply that he maintained that they are to be interpreted literally. On the contrary, all anthropomorphisms are to be interpreted allegorically; Rashi needs to comment only on those whose imagery we would have thought to be problematic **even as metaphors**.

Is this not an eminently reasonable explanation of Rashi's selectivity and silence? Could there not possibly be still other equally valid explanations as to Rashi's selectivity and silence? If so, then Slifkin's proposal does not meet the standard of proof for *argumentum ex silentio* even as a form of abductive reasoning. The point here is that it is nigh impossible, and highly presumptuous, to state definitively why Rashi speaks in some places and is silent in others, and to then use what amounts to a tentative hypothesis as a basis of "evidence" for corporealism, especially when there exists at least one different, valid and comprehensive explanation that points to incorporealism.

But this is not the only factor that negates Slifkin's claim in this area. His very hypothesis itself is proven false by a violation of his own stated rule. That is, Rashi comments about the non-literalism of an anthropomorphism in a place where Slifkin's hypothesis should have Rashi remaining silent. In his commentary on *Bereishis* 1:26, Rashi cites the following: "I have seen God sitting on His throne and the hosts of the heavens standing to His right and to His left.' 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." By

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<sup>28</sup> E.g., *Shemos* 20:1, which attributes "exhaustion" to God; *Shemos* 15:8 and *Devarim* 29:19, which attribute "shortness of breath" to God; *Devarim* 30:3, which attributes "bondage and exile" to God.

Slifkin's own standards, there is no reason whatsoever for Rashi to interpret the "right and left" here allegorically, yet Rashi does so.<sup>29</sup> Slifkin's own hypothesis is thus negated by this case, and his argument from conspicuous absence therefore falls apart.<sup>30</sup>

Addressing this challenge, Slifkin stated that Rashi's comment on I *Melakhim* 22:19, a parallel to Rashi's comment in *Bereishis*, "has nothing whatsoever to do with spatial right and left; rather the question is with regard to the attributes termed 'left' i.e. *din* and guilt. So this *Midrash* is no argument at all for Rashi[s] not being a corporealist."<sup>31</sup> In that light, let us examine Rashi's comment on I *Melakhim* 22:19. He writes as follows: "Is there a 'left' with regard to God? Is it not stated, 'The right hand of God is raised; the right hand of God does battle' (*Tehillim* 118:17), 'Your right hand, God, is glorified with strength; Your right hand, God, smashes the enemy' (*Shemos* 15:6)? Rather, these are 'righting' and those are 'lefting.' These 'righting' are defending, and those 'lefting' are indicting."

It is significant to note that while the answers that Rashi provides in *Bereishis* and in *Melakhim* are indeed the same, the question in each place is different. Notice that in *Melakhim*, Rashi asks "Is there a 'left' with regard to God?" without mentioning 'right' at all. Further, he cites two proof texts to show that there is only 'right' and no 'left' with regard to God. Rashi's question there is, "How can the verse attribute 'left' to God, when we know of only 'right' attributed to Him?" This, indeed, is not a spatial issue; it is a conceptual one. However, notice that in *Bereishis*, Rashi asks about both 'right' and 'left' equally and does not cite any proof texts at all. Here, he is asking, "How can the spatial concepts of right and left be attributed whatsoever to God?"<sup>32</sup> His one answer to both questions is that the vision is allegorical.

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<sup>29</sup> See the website thread "Was Rashi a Corporealist?" August 2, 2009, 5:03 am, and August 3, 2009, 1:57 am.

<sup>30</sup> The Rashi on *Bereishis* 1:26 does not present any problem whatsoever to the theory that I advanced above about Rashi's selectivity and silence. Rashi, as an incorporealist, is simply explaining here what the *midrashic* metaphor of "right" and "left" means with regard to God.

<sup>31</sup> From the website thread "Seeing No Image" August 12, 2009, 10:21 pm.

<sup>32</sup> This is particularly striking since Rashi, on his own initiative, purposely altered the question in his comments on *Bereishis* from that which is



Slifkin acknowledged this distinction, but added that the editors of the Sapirstein edition of Rashi did not see the differences between the two questions of Rashi as significant, and therefore the argument from Rashi's comments in *Bereishis* should not be considered an effective challenge.<sup>33</sup> When subsequently asked how merely citing the editors of the Sapirstein edition of Rashi disposes of the argument without addressing the substance of the issue,<sup>34</sup> Slifkin did not respond.

With all of the above, the second premise, the *argumentum ex silentio*, is revealed to be invalid for two reasons: the standard of proof was not met, and Slifkin's very hypothesis itself was negated by violations<sup>35</sup> of his own rule.

### The Third Premise

Let us now turn to Rashi's "euphemisms" which, according to Slifkin, imply a literal understanding of the biblical anthropomorphism about which Rashi is commenting. After citing *Targum Onkelos*, who, on *Shemos* 33:22, translated the biblical "I shall cover you with My hand" as "I shall shield you with My word," Rashi states that Onkelos employed a euphemism by way of honor for God. This honor, according to Slifkin, is that even though God did cover Moshe with His "actual hand," Onkelos purposely rephrased the episode out of respect to God. Slifkin adds that this explanation by Rashi is comparable to another one, on *Shemos* 19:4, where Rashi states that Onkelos rephrased the verse from "I carried you on the wings of vultures" to "I caused you to travel on the wings of vul-

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contained in all the *midrashic* sources. See *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 1:2, 9, where the question is presented as, "*ve-khi yesh s'mol le-ma'alab, ve-balo ha-kol yemin, she-ne'emar...*" See also *Shemos Rabbah* 4:4, *Midrash Tanchuma Shemos* 18, *Midrash Tanchuma Mishpatim* 15, and *Bereishis Rabbati Mikeitz*, page 200.

<sup>33</sup> See the website thread "Seeing No Image" August 14, 2009, 4:47 pm.

<sup>34</sup> See the website thread "Seeing No Image" August 14, 2009, 6:51 pm.

<sup>35</sup> There is another example of a violation of his own rule that negates Slifkin's hypothesis, from Rashi's comments on *Devarim* 20:4. For a more complete discussion of that area, see below, "The Third Evidence: Rashi's Explanation of 'God Walking.'"

tures” by way of honor for God.<sup>36</sup> Slifkin’s observation that these two comments of Rashi are related to each other is clearly correct; these are the only two instances in all of his commentary on the Torah<sup>37</sup> where Rashi explains Onkelos in this manner, i.e., that Onkelos modified his translation by way of honor for God.

Let us closely examine Slifkin’s claim: he argues that the fact “that God had to physically intervene to protect Moses, rather than simply ordering the destructive forces to leave him alone—lacks respect,”<sup>38</sup> and therefore, Rashi points out, Onkelos altered his translation. What does Slifkin mean here when he states that God “**had to**” physically intervene rather than simply order the destructive forces to leave Moshe alone? If he means that God **chose** to physically intervene rather than issue a command, and that this depiction lacks respect, then according to Slifkin every time that the Torah speaks of God’s “physical intervention” rather than His having issued a command, Onkelos should alter the translation and Rashi should point out that Onkelos did so by way of respect for God. After all, the depiction of God’s choosing to “act” rather than to command would, according to Slifkin, always lack respect. Yet, it is only in these two instances, *Shemos* 33:22 and 19:4, that Rashi comments in this fashion. Thus, Slifkin’s theory is inconsistent.

On the other hand, if Slifkin means that God was **compelled** to use physical intervention instead of merely issuing a command,<sup>39</sup> then he is saying that according to Rashi, the omnipotent God, Who created every single creature, including the angels, by mere commands,<sup>40</sup> could no longer control His creations by command alone, but instead had to resort to physical intervention. This view is logically impossible, and thus, based upon either meaning of Slifkin’s statement that

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<sup>36</sup> Slifkin p. 96.

<sup>37</sup> Rashi’s comment on *Shemos* 33:9 is not an instance of Rashi explaining Onkelos as having altered the translation of a word; indeed, Onkelos translated “*ve-diber*” literally, as God speaking, but to Himself, with Moshe present to listen.

<sup>38</sup> Slifkin, p. 95.

<sup>39</sup> And His being compelled to do so occurred only in the two instances in *Shemos*, which would explain why Rashi comments in this manner only in the two instances cited.

<sup>40</sup> See Rashi on *Avos* 5:1.

God “**had to** physically intervene,” his understanding of Rashi is untenable.

Further, Slifkin’s translation<sup>41</sup> of Rashi’s comments on *Shemos* 33:22, in support of his claim, is highly problematic. Rashi’s explanation of Onkelos’ translation is “*kinnui hu le-derekh kavod shel ma’alah she-eino tzarikh le-sokbeikh ‘alav be-khaf mamash.*” Slifkin translated Rashi’s comment as, “this is a euphemism, by way of honor for the Above, who **should not** need to cover [Moshe] with an actual hand.” Justifying this translation, Slifkin noted, “The phrase could also be translated as ‘does not need’ or ‘did not need.’ However, if God does not need a hand, why did Scripture state that He used His hand? If Rashi was of the view that God did not need to use His hand, we would surely expect him to explain why Scripture describes Him as using it.”<sup>42</sup> However, a careful review of all of the eleven other instances in which Rashi used a form of the term “*eino tzarikh*” in his commentary on the Torah<sup>43</sup> reveals that the correct translation of the term is “he **does** not need” and not “he **should** not need.” Rashi, in fact, uses a different term when meaning “he **should** not...” — namely “*lo hayah lo...*”<sup>44</sup> (Parenthetically, an answer to Slifkin’s question of “Why did Scripture state that He used His hand [if He did not]?” may be found in Rashi’s comments on *Iyyov* 13:21, wherein Rashi states that the connotation of the use of the term “*kaf*” is “protection.”)

The standard translation of Rashi’s comment, “...by way of honor for God, Who does not need to cover [Moshe]...” is indeed correct. With this translation, we may understand Rashi’s comment as follows: since God is omnipotent, there was no need for Him to cover Moshe with an actual hand in order to protect him as a literal reading of the *passuk* would imply, and therefore the Torah is **not** describing a literal occurrence, but rather is presenting a metaphor. However, since the limitation that is implied by the imagery of anthropomorphisms can be taken to be disrespectful when speaking of the unlimited Supreme Being, Onkelos adjusted the metaphor of the

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<sup>41</sup> See Slifkin, pp. 94-95.

<sup>42</sup> Slifkin, p. 95, footnote 36.

<sup>43</sup> Rashi on *Shemos* 7:15, 21:8,9, 22:14, *Vayikra* 1:17, 13:52, 21:12, 25:43, *Bemidbar* 20:12, 22:12, 30:4.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Rashi on *Bereishis* 49:28.

biblical verse to negate the connotation of any such limitation, and this is by way of honor for God.<sup>45</sup>

If this is so, however, one important question remains: Why would Rashi point this out only in the two specific instances of *Shemos* 33:22 and 19:4, when Onkelos alters many anthropomorphisms in the Torah? We may answer this question by noting that there is, in fact, one theme uniquely common to both of Rashi's statements. If we take all of Rashi's comments on *Shemos* 19:4 together, the biblical verse "...and I carried you as if<sup>46</sup> on the wings of vultures..." means that "it would be better for the arrow [of the enemy] to pierce Me, and not My children." If we take all of Rashi's comments on *Shemos* 33:22 together, the biblical verse "...and I shall cover My hand over you..." means that the destructive forces came to attack Moshe, but God shielded him from them. In both cases, i.e., the metaphor of the vultures' wings and the metaphor of God's *kaf*, God absorbs the blows of the "enemies" on behalf of those whom He is protecting. With this, we may suggest that Rashi highlighted Onkelos' alterations of biblical anthropomorphisms by way of honor for God specifically when the imagery of the Torah's metaphor implies other forces "attacking" God, with God absorbing their blows. Because of the dual aspects of disrespect, i.e., the limitation implied by anthropomorphisms in general, and the imagery of God absorbing the blows of an "enemy," Rashi highlighted Onkelos' alterations specifically in these two cases. This understanding of Rashi's comments does not result in any of the problems that made Slifkin's claim and translation untenable. Is the understanding of Rashi's comments presented here at least as valid as Slifkin's interpretation? If so, then his interpretation, which, in any case, itself has been shown to be highly problematic, is not at all evidentiary for Rashi's corporealism.

Regarding God's "descent" to *Bavel*, Rashi comments,<sup>47</sup> "And God descended to see... there was no need for this; rather, it comes

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<sup>45</sup> Thus, Slifkin is absolutely correct that Rashi is pointing out that the *kinnui* is to be found in Onkelos' translation, not in the biblical verse; however this is due to incorporealism, not to corporealism.

<sup>46</sup> Rashi makes it clear that the imagery of "vultures' wings" is a metaphor; "*ke-nesher ha-nosei gozalav...af ani assisi kein...*"

<sup>47</sup> On *Bereishis* 11:5.

to teach the judges...” Slifkin notes that “the language of Rashi implies that God actually descended.”<sup>48</sup> This “implication from Rashi’s language” is presented as evidence for his corporealism. However, we ought to be rigorous in our reading of Rashi’s comment and in our analysis by asking, Where is this implication? Rashi commented, “there was no need for this...” To what does the pronoun “this” refer? It is true that one may propose an understanding of Rashi as saying, “There was no need **for God to actually descend** to *Bavel*, however, He did so in order to teach the judges...” But it is also true that one can understand Rashi as saying, “There was no need **for the Torah to employ the metaphor** of God’s descent to *Bavel* (after all, in many instances of God’s “awareness” the Torah does not employ such a metaphor). However, the Torah did employ the metaphor here, specifically, to teach a lesson to the judges...” There is no more inherent weight to the former interpretation than there is to the latter,<sup>49</sup> <sup>50</sup> and thus, the implication derived from the former interpretation is not at all evidentiary.

Finally, regarding God’s passing over the homes of *bnei Yisrael* in *Mitzrayim*, Rashi comments,<sup>51</sup> “*Ufasachtu*, [this means] And I shall have mercy...and I (Rashi) say, every ‘*pesichab*’ is a term of skipping over and jumping...” Slifkin notes that “Rashi prefers to translate [*pesichab*] as referring to passing over... [and] shows no concern for the moti-

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<sup>48</sup> Slifkin, p. 97.

<sup>49</sup> It should be noted that all incorporealists clearly learn the *Midrash Tanchuma*, from which Rashi took his comments here, exactly in accordance with the latter interpretation.

<sup>50</sup> In fact, there is actually more weight to the latter interpretation. Rashi says, “*lo butzrakb le-kakb, ela ba lelamed...*” implying that there is one subject for both verbs, “*butzrakb*” and “*ba lelamed*.” In all other twenty-one places in his commentary on the Torah where Rashi uses a form of the phrase “*ba lelamed*,” he is referring to the *pasuk*, not to God. (See Rashi on *Bereishis* 35:22, *Shemos* 1:5, 12:20, 13:12, 19:8, 22:13, 25:21, *Vayikra* 6:2, 7:5, 11:23, 14:44,48, 20:20, 23:14, *Bemidbar* 7:84, 12:13, 19:21, 28:3, 35:16, *Devarim* 12:27, 22:26.) Thus, “*lo butzrakb*” here means that it was not necessary for **the *pasuk*** to employ the term of “descent.” It should be noted that Rashi’s referring to the **metaphor of the *pasuk***, rather than to God’s “actual descent,” is an indication of incorporealism.

<sup>51</sup> On *Shemos* 12:13.

vation behind Onkelos' translation, which was clearly to avoid the theological implications of ascribing movement to God."<sup>52</sup> This preference of translation and lack of concern for the motivation behind Onkelos' translation is advanced as "evidence" for Rashi's corporealism. However, both the *Chizkuni* and R. Yosef *Bekhor Shor*, two known incorporealist *rishonim*, explain the term "*pesichab*" in their comments on that very verse precisely in the same way that Rashi concluded. Clearly, their preference for that translation and apparent lack of concern for the motivation behind Onkelos' translation cannot possibly be evidence of their corporealism, for they were absolute incorporealists. How, then, can Rashi's explanation, which matches theirs, be adduced as evidence for his corporealism?<sup>53</sup> The argument that constitutes the third premise is thus shown to be specious.

### The Fourth Premise

Let us turn finally to Rashi's comments on the Talmudic discussions<sup>54</sup> concerning "the hanging man," "God's eyes," and "the decomposing face," in which Slifkin sees further evidence of Rashi's corporealism.<sup>55</sup>

With regard to "the hanging man," Slifkin notes that "Rashi explains simply that man is 'likewise made in the form (*dyukno*) of his Creator'... The simple reading of Rashi is certainly that man physically resembles God... While one could contrive a different explanation, Rashi makes no attempt whatsoever to dissuade his readers from such an interpretation, and the word *dyukno* in other contexts

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<sup>52</sup> Slifkin, p. 97.

<sup>53</sup> Further, Slifkin himself notes (p. 85) that there are instances when "Rashi's goal is to present an approach in translation...this does not prove or disprove [a corporealistic view of God]...it is merely a matter of translation." That statement can certainly apply to Rashi's comment on "*Ufasachtu*," since Rashi states clearly, "every '*pesichab*' is a term of skipping over and jumping..." Thus Slifkin adduces something as evidence here that his own earlier statements completely disqualify as evidence.

<sup>54</sup> It should be noted, as Slifkin himself points out (pp. 88-89), that Rashi's view with regard to the literalness of *midrashim* in general is subject to interpretation and debate.

<sup>55</sup> Slifkin, pp. 99-102.

always refers to a physical appearance.” On this issue, it is instructive to read the words of R. Yeshayah de’Trani the Elder, in his work *Nimukei Chumash le-Rabbeinu Yeshayah*.<sup>56</sup> R. Yeshayah was a known incorporealist *rishon*,<sup>57</sup> whose work on the *chumash* often clarifies Rashi’s comments. After citing Rashi’s comments on *Devarim* 21:23, R. Yeshayah states, “and in the *parashah* of *Bereishis* (1:27) [Rashi] explained, “And He created man in His image”—with the mold that was made for Him.’ Why did [Rashi] not explain ‘in His image’ literally? [Because] man is certainly not made in the image of the Creator [in a literal sense], and therefore [Rashi] explained beautifully ‘with the mold that was made for Him.’ And that which [Rashi] explained [here] that man is made with the *demus deyukno* [of God]—it is because when God is ‘seen’ by people, He is ‘seen’ as the image of a man; but the ‘*demus*’ [mentioned in *Bereishis*] is not known [to man].”

We thus have a *rishon* who explains the very quote from Rashi that Slifkin introduced as evidence of Rashi’s corporealism, in an absolutely incorporealistic way. Further, R. Yehoshu’a ibn Shu’ib, a prominent student of Rashba and a known incorporealist, cites Rashi’s use of the term “*deyukan*,” regarding man being made in the *deyukan* of his Creator (the core issue of both “the hanging man” and “the decomposing face”), explaining Rashi in an unequivocally incorporealistic way.<sup>58</sup> And so, there are two *rishonim* attesting to Rashi’s use of the term “*deyukan*” in such a way as to completely negate Slifkin’s claim.<sup>59</sup> Yet, when asked about the quote from ibn Shu’ib, Slifkin suggested that ibn Shu’ib’s understanding of Rashi was con-

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<sup>56</sup> On *Devarim* 21:23.

<sup>57</sup> See Kanarfogel, pp. 133–135, who cites R. Yeshayah’s extensive quotations from the *Moreh HaNevukhim* along with his (R. Yeshayah’s) own stated incorporealistic views.

<sup>58</sup> See *Derashos R. Yehoshu’a ibn Shu’ib*, on *Ki Seitzei*, where ibn Shu’ib states that Rashi’s concept of *deyukan* is a great “*sod*” that he (ibn Shu’ib) has explained numerous times already (in his *derashos* on *Bereishis*, *Yisro*, *Shavu’os*, *Terumah*, *VaYikra*, and *Shemini*), as follows: the soul of man is his intellect; it conjoins with his body, which is constructed in a special way so as to best “house” the intellect and to reflect sublime ideas. It is in this sense that man was made in the *deyukan* of his Creator.

<sup>59</sup> It is interesting to note that Slifkin himself acknowledged (p. 87) that “...taken on their own, Rashi’s comments regarding man being created in the image of God do not prove his views on God’s corporeality.”

trived and did not fit in as well with all other comments made by Rashi as did his own explanation.<sup>60</sup> This, despite the fact that Slifkin admitted to having seen “only a tiny fraction of Rashi’s extensive writings.”<sup>61</sup>

With regard to the mourner, the Talmud states,<sup>62</sup> “A mourner is obligated to overturn his bed, as bar Kappara taught, ‘[God says] ‘I gave them *demus deyukni* and they overturned it with their sins.’”<sup>63</sup> Before examining Rashi’s comments on this passage in the Talmud, let us ask, how would an incorporealist interpret the passage? From the incorporealist’s perspective, the Talmud is teaching that there is a concrete action (the overturning of the bed) that is mandated to reflect an abstract idea (that in death, which comes about through sin, man has “overturned” his *tzelem Elokim*<sup>63</sup>). The concrete action is a metaphor for the abstract concept; but how does the former reflect the latter? The concrete manifestation of the *tzelem Elokim* is man’s physical image, which was created in such a manner as to best “house” his intellect, the *tzelem Elokim* itself.<sup>64</sup> The main aspect of man’s physical image is his face; it is from his face that he is recognized and identified, and hence the definition of “*deyukan*” is the face.<sup>65</sup> Returning to the passage in the Talmud, what can the “overturning of man’s face,” as a reflection of death, mean—such that it can be represented by the overturning of the bed? The face is “overturned” when it begins to decompose. Thus, an incorporealist would interpret the Talmudic passage as follows: the mourner is enjoined to overturn his bed as a reflection of the fact that through sin, which

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<sup>60</sup> See the website thread “As It Were, So To Speak” August 20, 2009, 9:21 pm. Ironically, in another context Slifkin had written (incorrectly), “...interesting that you apparently prefer to follow the view of a contemporary academic over that of a *Rishon!*” See the website thread “Seeing No Image” August 5, 2009, 5:45 pm.

<sup>61</sup> See the website thread “My Latest Mistake,” main post.

<sup>62</sup> *Mo’ed Katan* 15a-15b.

<sup>63</sup> See *Shabbos* 55a and Rashi’s comment there, “There is no death without sin; man’s sins cause him death.”

<sup>64</sup> This, in fact, is exactly how ibn Shu’ib interprets Rashi’s understanding of *deyukan*. See footnote 58 above. Rashi’s explanation of man being created in God’s image is with regard to “understanding and wisdom.” See Rashi on *Bereishis* 1:26.

<sup>65</sup> See Rashi on *Chullin* 91b.



results in death, man has “overturned” his *tzelem Elokim*, which is represented in the concrete world by man’s form (the essence of which lies in the face), a form that was designed to house his intellect.

Rashi’s comments on *Mo’ed Katan* 15b are completely consistent with this interpretation of the Talmudic passage. He states, “In their sins they overturned [the *demus deyukni*]—since in a dead person, his face is overturned and changes, bar Kappara taught, as a *baraisa* [to explain the mourner’s obligation to overturn the bed], that it is as if God says this [lesson] to mankind.” Now, it is true that one can interpret Rashi’s comments such that he is explaining that man’s physical image literally reflects God’s; however, that interpretation carries no more weight than the one offered above. In fact, it carries less weight, since it is contrary to the understanding of Rashi’s concept of *demus deyukan* as explained by R. Yeshayah deTrani the Elder and R. Yehoshu’a ibn Shu’ib. At any event, since there is another, at least equally valid interpretation of Rashi’s comments here, one that is incorporealistic, Slifkin’s interpretation cannot be characterized as evidence for Rashi’s corporealism.

Finally, with regard to “God’s eyes,” Slifkin claims that since “Rashi explains that [the Talmudic exegesis about *re’iyah*] refers to God, reading it as follows: Just as God comes to see man with His two eyes, so too He is to be seen by a man with two eyes,” we can infer that Rashi maintained that God has two actual eyes.<sup>66</sup> Slifkin does note that “Rabbi Meir Abulafia[h] admits that [the Talmudic passage] can be read as referring to God, but he does not explain it as God possessing two eyes.”<sup>67</sup>

Actually, what R. Meir Abulafia says is, “And if you would like to say that [the two eyes] refer to [those of God], this is what [the Talmud] means: just as a person is seen (at the Temple)—the One Who sees him sees with two eyes, **meaning, with complete vision**, because He is not lacking anything from the vision fit for Him, so too when the person comes [to the Temple] to see, he has to see with both his eyes; he cannot be lacking anything from the vision that is fit for him. And why is the vision fit for God referred to as ‘with both His eyes’? [Because] the Torah spoke in the language of man. [The Torah] utilized something that is common among human beings be-

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<sup>66</sup> Slifkin, p. 100.

<sup>67</sup> Slifkin, p. 101.

cause it is known to them; with regard to human beings there is no **complete vision** unless it is with two eyes.”<sup>68</sup> In fact, Rashi himself alludes to the idea contained in this explanation, in his comments on *Sanhedrin* 4b, explaining how we derive that the *‘oleh la-regel* must be able to see with both his eyes, “just as He sees you, as He is **complete**, for it is stated, ‘The **eyes** (in the plural) of God your Lord are upon [the land of Israel]...’ (*Devarim* 11:12).”

We thus have a *rishon*, R. Meir Abulafia, whose explanation of the Talmudic passage regarding “God’s eyes” provides a clear basis for understanding Rashi’s words in a completely incorporealistic way, a way to which Rashi himself alludes. Therefore, no evidence for Rashi’s corporealism can be adduced from his comments about God’s eyes.<sup>69</sup>

### The Evidence for Rashi’s Incorporealism

With all of the above, every single one of the four premises upon which Slifkin’s argument rests has been shown to be either factually untrue or logically invalid as evidence. It should be noted that as a result, any claim of “combination of evidence” here for Rashi’s corporealism<sup>70</sup> is equally invalid as well. Since we have seen for each of the four premises that there is **at least** as much weight to support a

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<sup>68</sup> *Yad Ramah* on *Sanhedrin* 4b.

<sup>69</sup> It should be noted that Slifkin claims (p. 101) that Rabbeinu Tam in *Tosafos* on *Chagigah* 2a objects to Rashi’s comments in such a way as to indicate that Rabbeinu Tam viewed Rashi’s comments as corporealistic. Slifkin’s argument is that Rabbeinu Tam objected to Rashi’s comment that God arrives at the Temple—and if Rashi’s comments about God’s movement were viewed by Rabbeinu Tam as literal, then so too must Rashi’s comments about God’s eyes have been viewed by Rabbeinu Tam as literal. However, Slifkin misunderstands Rabbeinu Tam. The latter’s objection was not at all about God literally moving; rather, it was about the “Divine Presence” always being everywhere, a concept that would be contravened by any depiction, including an allegorical one, of God’s “arrival” at the Temple. Thus, one cannot draw any conclusion whatsoever from this issue to that of God’s “eyes.”

<sup>70</sup> See the website thread “Was Rashi a Corporealist?” July 22, 2009, 10:45 pm, and the thread “Hanging Corpses and Decomposing Faces” July 29, 2009, 2:27 am, and the thread “Corporealism Redux, part II,” main post.

conclusion of Rashi's incorporealism as there is to support his corporealism, the "combination of evidence" does not indicate corporealism whatsoever. Not only that, but we have also seen some strong indications from Rashi himself that actually point to incorporealism.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the application of a "combination of evidence" here will also generate greater problems than it attempts to solve. My argument, however, does not end here. There are four significant areas that provide positive evidence for Rashi's incorporealism.

### The First Evidence: Rashi's Comments on the Opening of the Heavens

One of the principal verses cited as a proof text for incorporealism is *Devarim* 4:15, "...for you did not see any image (*lo re'isem kol temunah*) on the day that God spoke to you at Chorev..."<sup>72</sup> When confronted with that verse, a corporealist must respond by saying that, in fact, there did exist an image; however, *bnei Yisrael* did not see it.

With that in mind, let us examine three comments of Rashi, all of which refer to this phenomenon of *bnei Yisrael* not seeing any image at Chorev (Sinai). On the statement in *Yeshayahu* 44:8, "...and you are my witnesses; is there a god aside from Me?" Rashi comments, "From Mount Sinai I told you that there is no god aside from Me, and you are My witnesses in that I opened for you the seven heavens and I showed you that there is none else; you are My witnesses in this matter that there is no god aside from Me." Further, on the statement in *Devarim* 4:35, "You have been shown in order to know that God is the Lord; there is none aside from Him," Rashi comments, "When the Holy One Blessed be He gave the Torah, He opened for [*bnei Yisrael*] the seven heavens, and just as He tore open the upper ones, so did He tear open the lower ones, and [*bnei Yisrael*] saw that He is the only One..." Finally, on the statement in *Yeshayahu* 43:12, "...and you are My witnesses, says God, and I am the Lord," Rashi com-

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<sup>71</sup> I.e., Rashi's reference to God's "descent" to *Bavel* as the *pasuk*'s metaphor to teach a lesson to the judges, and his allusion regarding God's two eyes as a metaphor for complete vision. Rashi's comments about God's "right and left" are more than just a "strong indication" of Rashi's incorporealism; they are actual evidence of it, and will be presented as such below.

<sup>72</sup> See, e.g., Rambam, *Hilkebos Yesodei HaTorah* 1:8.

ments, “You are my witnesses in that I opened for you the seven heavens and you did not see any image (*lo re’isem kol temunah*).”

It is clear that all three of these comments of Rashi refer to the same event, the Revelation at Sinai, about which it is stated in *Devarim* 4:15, “...for you did not see any image...” If Rashi were a corporealist, he must, as noted above, interpret this last verse to mean that, in fact, there did exist an image; however, *bnei Yisrael* did not see it. Now, according to Rashi, the heavens were opened at the Revelation and *bnei Yisrael* saw no image whatsoever, and are therefore called upon by God to give testimony that there is no god aside from Him. But what kind of testimony would this be? If God does, in fact, possess an image, and yet *bnei Yisrael* did not see it at the Revelation, then there could very well be other gods who, likewise, possess an image that *bnei Yisrael* did not see. Whatever could be said of a corporeal God with regard to (in)visibility could also be said about other corporeal gods as well. Our testimony, therefore, would be meaningless; we would be testifying that something did not exist when it could very well have been present but merely hidden from our view, just as God was. With this, Rashi’s comments linking the testimony to the idea of seeing no image would be entirely incomprehensible.

However, if Rashi was an incorporealist, that is, if the reason that *bnei Yisrael* did not see any image at the Revelation is that there did not exist any image whatsoever to see, then the testimony makes perfect sense. God revealed to *bnei Yisrael* the seven heavens in a complete and thorough manner, such that if there were any corporeal deities, *bnei Yisrael* would have perceived them. If *bnei Yisrael* then did not perceive any corporeal deity, not God nor gods, then the only way that there could exist any god other than He would be if the other god was also incorporeal. That would mean, then, that there exist two incorporeal deities; and that is logically impossible.<sup>73</sup> Since the only possibility, after witnessing that there exists no corporeal deity whatsoever, is that God, the Incorporeal, exists alone, then *bnei Yisrael* can indeed bear true testimony to the world about that fact.

A corporealist would have no problem interpreting the verses about seeing no image at Sinai and the verses about the testimony of *bnei Yisrael* if he understood the two issues to be unrelated to each

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<sup>73</sup> For the logical argument as to why that is impossible, see, for example, Rambam, *Hilkhos Yesodei HaTorah* 1:7.

other;<sup>74</sup> it is only by linking the two issues together that an insurmountable problem concerning the testimony emerges for the corporealist. Rashi's comments, therefore, linking the phenomenon of *bnei Yisrael's* not seeing any image whatsoever at Sinai with their mandate to bear witness to the world about God being the only One, are evidence that Rashi must have been an incorporealist. And it should come as no surprise that this evidence for Rashi's incorporealism revolves around the issue of not seeing any image whatsoever at Sinai; after all, the verse of "*lo re'isem kol temunah*" (which Rashi, from his comments, understood to mean that there did not exist any image whatsoever to see) is a principal proof text for the doctrine of incorporealism, as noted above. In fact, Ramban cited the verse from *Yeshayahu* concerning *bnei Yisrael's* testimony as one of his proof texts for the doctrine of incorporeality.<sup>75</sup>

After reading this argument, Slifkin raised three objections, as follows: [1] Unless we know the method by which *bnei Yisrael* saw what they did in the heavens, and what Rashi's view of *heikhalot* literature was in general, nothing can be proven from the testimony issue. For example, perhaps the other gods in the heavens were corporeal but not perceivable by the senses, just as radiation is corporeal but not perceivable by the senses.<sup>76</sup> [2] *Bnei Yisrael* were called upon to give testimony only about the pantheon of gods that others were worshipping at the time, and that were claimed to inhabit the seven heavens, not about remote, imperceptible gods, which are impossible to disprove.<sup>77</sup> [3] It is unlikely that Rashi would use as a premise the logical argument concerning the impossibility of two incorporeal deities. This argument is philosophical in nature. We can well understand Rambam citing such an argument insofar as he must have taken it from the Greek and Muslim philosophers; however, there is no

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<sup>74</sup> The testimony of *bnei Yisrael* would then be about the fact that only God has revealed Himself to Israel repeatedly throughout history; only God has been a source of salvation, etc.

<sup>75</sup> *Kisvei Ramban*, volume I, p. 347.

<sup>76</sup> See the website thread "Seeing No Image" August 13, 2009, 4:03 pm and August 14, 2009, 12:08 am.

<sup>77</sup> See the website thread "Seeing No Image" August 1, 2009, 3:16 am.

evidence that the French *risbonim* engaged in such philosophical pursuits.<sup>78</sup>

As to the first objection, knowing the specific method by which *bnei Yisrael* were shown all of the heavens (in order for them to perceive that there were no corporeal deities there) is completely irrelevant to the argument. God revealed to them all of the heavens as part of His design that *bnei Yisrael* would then be able to testify that there were absolutely no corporeal deities there. God is omniscient and omnipotent, and thus has the capability of accomplishing His objective; it therefore follows that in whatever way God showed *bnei Yisrael* the heavens, that way was sufficient for the purpose that God intended for it. Thus, *bnei Yisrael* must have had the ability to perceive that there was nothing corporeal, in any sense of the word, as a deity, even in the form of radiation or the like; if this were not true, then one would have to say that God did not provide *bnei Yisrael* with the proper means of accomplishing what He designed for them. As a result, knowing **how** God showed *bnei Yisrael* the heavens is irrelevant; knowing **that** He showed them the heavens is the significant point. The claim that the matter cannot be discussed until we know how God revealed what He did to *bnei Yisrael*, or what Rashi's view of *heikhalot* literature was, is thus an obfuscation of the argument.

Upon reading this rejoinder to his first objection, Slifkin repeated his claim that unless we know how God revealed the heavens to *bnei Yisrael*, we cannot discuss the event as part of any argument,<sup>79</sup> and when asked for an explanation as to the rationale behind this claim in light of the rejoinder to his objection,<sup>80</sup> Slifkin did not respond.

As to Slifkin's second objection, that *bnei Yisrael* were called upon to give testimony only about the pantheon of gods that others were worshipping at the time, aside from the fact that this is an unsubstantiated assumption, *bnei Yisrael* were called upon by God to be witnesses as reported by the prophet Yeshayahu, who prophesied more than seven hundred years after the revelation at Sinai. The "pantheon" of gods during the time of Yeshayahu was much different

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<sup>78</sup> See the website thread "Seeing No Image" July 31, 2009, 6:15 pm and 7:44 pm.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, the website thread "Seeing No Image" August 14, 2009, 2:09 am and 4:52 pm.

<sup>80</sup> See the website thread "Seeing No Image" August 14, 2009, 6:51 pm.

from the “pantheon” of gods during the time of the revelation at Sinai. Which pantheon was meant to be excluded by the revelation to *bnei Yisrael* of the heavens at Sinai? In fact, the context of the two statements of “you are My witnesses” mentioned by Yeshayahu<sup>81</sup> suggests that the mission of *bnei Yisrael*’s testimony is eternal, not limited to the days of Sinai alone or to the days of Yeshayahu alone. Thus, the claim about the testimony being limited to the pantheon of gods at the time is fallacious.

Finally, the third objection, that it is unlikely that Rashi would use a philosophical argument as one of his premises, is based upon a logical non-sequitur. Just because Rashi was not exposed to Greek and Muslim philosophy does not mean that it is unlikely that he would independently formulate a perfectly logical argument that is also within the realm of philosophical concerns, especially when the issue of the argument, “*ein od milvado*,” is a theme central to Torah. Are all Ashkenazic *rishonim* precluded from independently arriving at any logical conclusion about which the Greek or Muslim philosophers wrote? There is nothing within the argument concerning the logical impossibility of two incorporeal gods, in terms of both the content and the formulation of the argument, that makes it uniquely or especially “Greek” or “Muslim”; it is simply a logical conclusion. This is not the same as medieval Sephardic *rishonim* using the language and structure of Greek and Muslim philosophy in order to clarify a Torah lesson that they wished to explain.

Moreover, we know that the Ashkenazic Torah scholars had access to an early Hebrew complete paraphrasing of R. Sa’adyah Gaon’s *Emunos VeDe’os*, and that they attributed great authority to it.<sup>82</sup> We also know that Rashi saw this complete paraphrasing of *Emunos VeDe’os*, as he cites from it (VIII:3) in his commentary on *Daniel* 7:25. *Emunos VeDe’os* II:2 has a logical argument, very similar to that of Rambam, for the impossibility of two incorporeal gods. It is therefore clear that Rashi was directly exposed to this argument. The premise of the logical argument about the impossibility of two incorporeal gods is thus well within Rashi’s purview.

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<sup>81</sup> *Yeshayahu* 43:12, 44:8.

<sup>82</sup> See I. M. Ta-Shma, *Creativity and Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2006), p. 29.

With Rashi's emphasis (he repeated the same idea three times) in his comments on *Yeshayahu* and *Devarim*, we thus have direct evidence, from within his own writings, that Rashi was an incorporealist, and the location of this evidence is exactly where we might expect a discussion of incorporealism to be.

### **The Second Evidence: Rashi's Question about God's "Right and Left"**

We have seen above<sup>83</sup> that Rashi,<sup>84</sup> of his own initiative, purposely altered the *Midrash's* question from "is there such a thing as 'left' with regard to the Above; is it not true that there is only 'right'?" to "is there such a thing as 'right' and 'left' with regard to God?" He is asking here, "how can the spatial concepts of right and left be attributed whatsoever to God?" If Rashi were a corporealist, his revised question would make no sense. If God, indeed, has a body, then surely "right" and "left" are attributable to Him. By posing his rhetorical question, suggesting that God, of course, does not have a "right" or a "left," Rashi clearly reflects his view that God does not have a body whatsoever.

### **The Third Evidence: Rashi's Explanation of "God Walking"**

In his comments on the biblical verse "For God your Lord—He walks with you to do battle for you..." (*Devarim* 20:4), Rashi states "He walks with you"—this [refers to] the camp of the Ark." The source of Rashi's comment is a *mishnah* in *Sotah*.<sup>85</sup> Rashi, commenting on the *gemara* there,<sup>86</sup> states, "And why did [the *kobein*] say all of this to [the army]? And what is this promise that he promised [the soldiers] that 'God your Lord—He walks with you,' rather than [merely] saying that 'God your Lord is with you'? And what is this 'walking,' which implies that He literally walks? [Therefore the Talmud teaches] that the Name of God and all references to Him [contained in the *luchos*] stand inside the Ark which goes out with [the soldiers] to war."

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<sup>83</sup> In the section "The Second Premise."

<sup>84</sup> On *Bereishis* 1:26.

<sup>85</sup> *Sotah* 42a.

<sup>86</sup> *Sotah* 42b.



Rashi explains that since the connotation of “walks” in the *pasuk* is literal, and this literal understanding presents a problem, the *mishnah* therefore learned that the phrase “God walks” refers to the Ark. If Rashi were indeed a corporealist, his explanation of the Talmud’s discussion here would not make sense; what could possibly be wrong with understanding the biblical phrase “God walks” literally?<sup>87</sup> Rashi’s linking of the *mishnah*’s statement to the impossibility of a literal understanding of the phrase “God walks” (such that the phrase must be interpreted as referring to the Ark) clearly demonstrates Rashi’s incorporealism,<sup>88</sup> again from within his own writings. However, there is still another important source of evidence, from outside his own writings, for Rashi’s incorporealism.

### **The Fourth Evidence: Eight or Nine *Rishonim* Attest, Explicitly or Implicitly, to Rashi’s Incorporealism**

Rashi’s commentaries were well known among many of the *rishonim*, both Ashkenazic and Sephardic. It is therefore not surprising to see numerous commentaries citing Rashi by name. We shall focus here on nine *rishonim* who cite Rashi in their own works, and on the implications of the various citations by these *rishonim*.

R. Asher ben Gershom of Beziers,<sup>89</sup> a thirteenth-century French rabbi, as well as R. Yehoshu’a ibn Shu’ib, a prominent student of Rashba, and R. Yeshayah deTrani the Elder,<sup>90</sup> wrote explicitly about Rashi’s incorporealism. In addition to these explicit references to Rashi’s incorporealism, we may infer from what some other *rishonim* wrote, that they viewed Rashi as an incorporealist as well. Ramban, Rashba, Ritva, and Abudraham were all known incorporealists, emphasizing incorporealism as the essential doctrine of Judaism, and

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<sup>87</sup> Just as God could literally carry His people out of *Mitzrayim* into the desert, according to Slifkin’s understanding of Rashi, so too could He literally walk with His people in their battles.

<sup>88</sup> A true corporealist would simply ascribe the *mishnah*’s statement about the “camp of the Ark” to a self-standing oral tradition. The basis for such a tradition might be inferred by a corporealist from the Talmud’s statement at the top of *Sotah* 43a.

<sup>89</sup> Slifkin cited R. Asher’s letter in his article, p. 89.

<sup>90</sup> As noted above in the refutation of Slifkin’s fourth premise.

denouncing corporealism entirely.<sup>91</sup> They all cite Rashi extensively throughout their works, and do so with great respect and praise. 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. A similar inference may be made concerning R. Avraham ben HaRambam's citations of Rashi, although he does not cite Rashi nearly as extensively as do the other four *rishonim* mentioned. Nevertheless, when he does cite Rashi, it is always done with great esteem.<sup>92</sup>

Finally, there is the case of *Machzor Vitry*, written by one of Rashi's most beloved students, R. Simchah. Section 426 of that work is part of a commentary on *Pirkei Avos*, wherein the commentary states, "...since the Creator has no form or image, anyone who says ['by the *tzelem* of God **itself** did He create man?'] we suspect him of being a heretic." There is a variant manuscript with a slight change in the wording;<sup>93</sup> however, the meaning is the same—there is a clear equation between corporealism and heresy. The traditional view is that this part of *Machzor Vitry* was written by R. Simchah as well. If that is so, and if Rashi were a corporealist, then the beloved student of Rashi would be calling his *rebbe* a heretic. This is an untenable conclusion. (Again, it is important to note that *Machzor Vitry* cites Rashi extensively and with great esteem.)

It has been suggested recently that this section of *Machzor Vitry* was written not by R. Simchah, but rather by R. Ya'akov bar Shimshon.<sup>94</sup> However, insofar as R. Ya'akov was another of Rashi's beloved students,<sup>95</sup> the argument above, that it is untenable that the student would be charging his *rebbe* with heresy and yet maintain great respect for him, applies as well.

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<sup>91</sup> Ramban's view can be seen from his letter cited above, from *Kisvei Ramban* volume I, pp. 345–347. Rashba's view can be seen from *She'eilos uTeshuvos HaRashba* I:418. Ritva's view can be seen from his work *Sefer HaZikaron*. Abudraham's view can be seen from his commentary on *Birkos Eirusin VeNissuin*.

<sup>92</sup> Slifkin noted this in his article, p. 104.

<sup>93</sup> See M. M. Kasher, *Torah Sheleimah* (Jerusalem: Torah Shelemah Institute 1980), 16:310, note 3.

<sup>94</sup> See A. Grossman, *Chakmei Tzorfas HaRishonim* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press Hebrew University, 1995), pp. 412–416.

<sup>95</sup> See E. E. Urbach, *Ba'alei HaTosafos* (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute 1980), volume I, p. 61.

There is a third possibility with regard to this quote in *Machzor Vitry*. R. Moshe Taku, a known corporealist,<sup>96</sup> states in his *Kesav Tamim*<sup>97</sup> that “R. Ya’akov bar Shimshon, who wrote a commentary on the tractate of *Avos*, wrote that anyone who explains the phrase ‘*be-tzalmo, be-tzelem, Elokim bara oso,*’ we suspect him of being a heretic, meaning that anyone who says that God does not have a ‘*tzelem*’ [we suspect him of being a heretic].” If this quote by R. Moshe Taku is yet another variant manuscript of the commentary on *Pirkei Avos* that is found in *Machzor Vitry*, then indeed, it does not support the claim that R. Ya’akov bar Shimshon saw Rashi as an incorporealist. At the same time, it is important to note that it does not support the claim that R. Ya’akov saw Rashi as a corporealist either. The meaning of R. Moshe Taku’s quote is **not** “if one claims that God does not have a form, he is a heretic,” because, as Kanarfogel points out, “Rabbi Moses distinguishes elsewhere in *Ketav Tamim* between a *tzelem*, which God has, and a fixed *demut*, which He does not have. *Tzelem* for Rabbi Moses denotes the fact that a being (in this case the Almighty) actually exists, as opposed to *demut*, which conveys the notion of a fixed form...”<sup>98</sup> Thus, R. Moshe Taku is quoting R. Ya’akov here as saying that he who reads the biblical verse in such a way as to suggest that God has no *tzelem*, i.e., no “beingness,” we suspect him of heresy. If this is so, then the quote by R. Ya’akov, as reported by R. Moshe Taku, is not relevant per se to the issue of corporealism one way or the other.

Thus, as far as *Machzor Vitry* is concerned, if the section of commentary on *Pirkei Avos* was written by R. Simchah, it is certainly evidence for Rashi’s incorporealism. Likewise, if it was written by R. Ya’akov, and the authentic text is either of the extant manuscript versions, it is also evidence for Rashi’s incorporealism. If it was written by R. Ya’akov, and the authentic text is the version of R. Moshe

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<sup>96</sup> It is worth noting that R. Moshe Taku’s corporealism is not the same as that which Slifkin attributes to Rashi. R. Moshe Taku did **not** maintain that God has a fixed body; rather, he maintained that God has the ability, if He so chooses, to adopt a form when appearing to angels or prophets. See Kanarfogel, pp. 122-123.

<sup>97</sup> See I. Blumenfeld ed., *Ozar Nechmad* (Vienna: Knopfmacher and Son Publishers 1860), pp. 59-60.

<sup>98</sup> Kanarfogel, pp. 123-124.

Taku, then it is not evidence either way about Rashi's view on corporealism.

We now have nine *risbonim* (eight, if we follow the last cited view about R. Ya'akov) whose words attest, either explicitly or implicitly, to Rashi's incorporealism. In response to this class of evidence, some of which he had raised himself, Slifkin stated that he was able to see in Rashi what all of these *risbonim* did not; "only when considering the possibility that Rashi was a corporealist, and surveying all Rashi's comments in light of that possibility, does a powerful case emerge."<sup>99</sup> He likewise stated that "a Rabbi Dr. with many decades of expertise in medieval Jewish theology... said that I probably put more thought into Rashi's view of God than Rashi himself ever did. R. Simcha Vitry... may have never known what his rebbe's view was."<sup>100</sup>

There are three factors necessary in order to properly infer Rashi's position concerning corporealism. They are: [1] an extensive familiarity with Rashi's oeuvre, [2] mastery of analytic skills (deduction, induction, and abduction), and [3] a sensitivity to and focus on the specific issue of corporealism. Slifkin has already admitted his lack of extensive familiarity with Rashi's oeuvre.<sup>101</sup> I shall assume that he would admit to the superiority of the *risbonim* regarding their analytic skills over his. It is clear that he was sensitive to and focused upon the issue of corporealism in Rashi. However, in the case of at least six of the *risbonim* cited earlier,<sup>102</sup> they were highly sensitive to the issue of corporealism, as evidenced by their overt, written concern regarding this issue. It is true that they were not looking for corporealism specifically in Rashi's writings more so than anywhere else; however, they were clearly concerned about this critical issue, one that they viewed as being antithetical to Judaism, **wherever** it might surface. Thus, aside from the refutation of Slifkin's four premises, and aside from the positive evidence from Rashi's own words, the weight of the explicit and implicit words of the eight or nine *risbonim* about Rashi's position affirms his view of incorporealism as well.

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<sup>99</sup> See Slifkin p. 104, and the website thread "As It Were, So To Speak" August 21, 2009, 5:22 pm, 5:25 pm.

<sup>100</sup> See the website thread "Seeing No Image" August 2, 2009, 8:55 am.

<sup>101</sup> See the website thread "My Latest Mistake," main post.

<sup>102</sup> Specifically, R. Asher ben Gershom, Ramban, Rashba, Abudraham, R. Avraham ben HaRambam, and *Machzor Vitry*.

## Conclusion

We have seen that the entire argument that Slifkin presented regarding Rashi's corporealism rests upon premises each of which is factually untrue or logically invalid as evidence. In discussing those premises, we saw indications from Rashi's own writings that point toward incorporealism. We then saw Rashi's comments on *bnei Yisrael's* seeing no image at Sinai and then being called upon to testify about that to the world, which unequivocally reflect Rashi's incorporealism. We also saw Rashi's revised, rhetorical question about God's "right and left" and his comments about the biblical phrase "God walks," which clearly demonstrate his incorporealism. In addition, we saw evidence from eight or nine *rishonim* that attests to Rashi's incorporealism. A critical evaluation of Rashi's view concerning corporealism, when subjected to the rigors of careful examination for factual accuracy and to logical analysis, thus yields a definitive conclusion<sup>103</sup>—Rashi was clearly an incorporealist.

One final note: with this paper, the highly problematic assertion that "Rashi said it, but we cannot"<sup>104</sup> is now moot; indeed, Rashi never "said it."

## Postscript

I present this paper to address not only the major specific sources that have been cited up to now in the discussion concerning Rashi's (in)corporealism; the paper is intended as well to present a **methodological approach** as to how to examine and view any source, including those that may be cited in the future, in the topic of this discussion. ❧

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<sup>103</sup> It is therefore somewhat ironic that at the end of the discussion on his website, after leaving a number of challenges to his theory unanswered, Slifkin declared that most devout Orthodox Jews are likely to be biased about this entire issue and therefore are likely to be unable to evaluate it properly. See the website thread "My Latest Mistake," main post, and the thread "Arguing With Creationists and Other Biases" August 18, 2009, 7:22 pm.

<sup>104</sup> Slifkin, p. 105.