

The Corporeality Which Never Was

by Rabbi Aharon Lopiansky

This article should never have been published. It deals with a topic that should not be discussed in an English-language journal. Rather, the article requires dedicated reading by sophisticated scholars fluent in Hebrew, and, due to the sensitivity of the topic, should be approached with trepidation. Yet an incident occurred that compelled me to write this article, my personal limitations and the venue's unsuitability notwithstanding. Not long ago, in the course of a casual conversation, someone mentioned to me that "whether God has a body or not is a difference of opinion (*machlokes*) between the Rambam and R. Moshe Taku." The assertion was made with the same confidence and ease that one might have mentioned the *machlokes* of Rashi and Rabbeynu Tam regarding the order of *parshiyos* in *tefillin*. I was taken aback by my interlocutor's certainty and responded, "Do you realize the implications of what you are saying? And have you actually seen R. Moshe Taku's opinion in its source?" I have, since then, heard similar comments, and therefore I felt it imperative that the record be set straight. In short, there is no evidence that the notion of God's corporeality is indeed R. Moshe Taku's thesis, as we shall show.

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Incorporeality as a Fundamental of Faith

The Rambam, in his commentary on the *Mishnayos*¹ and in his *Mishneh Torah*,² lists God's incorporeality as the third fundamental of the faith and this view is the unaimously espoused position of all recorded Torah authorities.³ On the face of it, there are very powerful reasons for rejecting the belief in corporeality as untenable. On the other hand, on Rambam's statement that belief in corporeality is blasphemous, Ra'avad disagrees in an astonishing gloss, stating that there are "greater and better people [than Rambam] who held that position, due to the verses in the Torah which they had read and, even more, because of what they had seen in the *Aggadata* sections of Talmud, which confuse the mind."⁴ This comment by the Ra'avad has confounded generations of students who have never found those "greater and better" authorities who took that position.⁵ (In truth, they even found it difficult to identify any group of people who could be considered "greater and better" than the Rambam—even those who did not believe in corporeality.⁶) Be that as it may, it seems that we apparently have, according to the Ra'avad, record of a group of Rabbis who believe that God is a corporal entity.

There is a second source of the idea that there are those who would believe in corporeality: the polemic against the Rambam's detractors, namely R. Yonah, R. Shlomo ben Avrohom, and R. Dovid ben Shaul. The Rambam's son, R. Avrohom, wrote his *Milchemes Hashem* to attack them, and the Ramban wrote letters defending the Rambam against these detractors. It would appear from these writings that the opponents of the Rambam seemed to have believed in a corporeal Deity. The problem with deriving such a thesis from these polemics is that they merely repeat hearsay evidence but no actual citations of the view held by the Rambam's opponents. It is literally impossible to reconstruct any

1 Introduction to *Sanhedrin*, chap.10.

2 *Hilchos Yesodey HaTorah* 1: 8-11

3 In truth, it is R. Sa'adia Gaon who, in the second section of *Emunos veDeyos*, first articulated and expounded this point, but it is the Rambam's words that have always been quoted.

4 *Hilchos Teshuvah* 3:7.

5 See *Kesef Mishna*, *ibid.*, and many others.

6 The Chazon Ish (*Yoreh Dey'ah* 62:21) translates the Ra'avad's statement as "great and good people among them [the Jewish people]." Thus, the Ra'avad is not referring to Torah authorities who held this view, but to simple, good Jews.

position actually held by the detractors of the Rambam.

The seemingly most explicit proponent of corporeality is the work *Kesav Tamim* by R. Moshe Taku.⁷ Before examining what he actually said, it would be profitable to know who R. Moshe Taku was and the nature of the work *Kesav Tamim*.

R. Moshe Taku and the *Kesav Tamim*

There is a clear record of a R. Moshe ben Chasdai of Taku living in various places in Eastern Europe and in Eretz Yisroel. We can also definitively date him as having lived before 1234, for he is quoted in *Arugas haBosem*, a classic work on *piyutim* by R. Avrohom ben Azriel, where he is mentioned as deceased. Since *Arugas haBosem* was published in 1234, we can conclude that he lived before that date. The Ramban refers to him as having lived in, and having come from, Poland (and as having been alive at the time of the writing of *Chidushey Ramban*).⁸ The Or Zoru'a,⁹ the Mordechai,¹⁰ Maharam miRutenberg,¹¹ Migdal Oz,¹² and Mahari Beruna¹³ quote him as well, in various halachic contexts.

We also know that R. Moshe Taku wrote a work called *Kesav Tamim*. It is cited in *Arugas haBosem* and by the Rema in his *Toras haOlah*¹⁴ as well as in his responsa. There is, however, no mention in any of these works of controversial positions held by R. Moshe Taku.

In the 1800's, a researcher of Hebrew manuscripts, Eliakim Carmoly (1802-1875), found an unidentified manuscript consisting of about 54 pages in the French National Library (Hébreu 711). The beginning and the end of the manuscript were missing and there was no clue as to how much was

7 R. Moshe Taku, *Ketav Tamim: k.y. Paris H711*, Yosef Dan, ed. (Jerusalem: Merkaz Dinur (Kuntresim 61), 1984).

8 *Gitin* 7b.

9 *Or Zarua Katan* 43:125.

10 *Mikva'os* 746.

11 *Teshuvos Aruchos* 601.

12 *Hilchos Shekalim* 3:8.

13 *Teshuvos Mahari Beruna* 24:168.

14 *Toras HaOlah* 3:70.

missing. The manuscript had misordered pages, and one or two pages within it were missing. Carmoly, by a flash of inspiration, matched two passages cited in *Arugas haBosem* to two passages in the manuscript, and also matched an attribution error in the manuscript¹⁵ to the same error cited by the Rema in *Toras haOlah* as coming from the *Kesav Tamim*. Carmoly thereby determined that the manuscript was R. Moshe Taku's *Kesav Tamim*.

In 1860, Rafael Kirchheim published the manuscript (in typeset format) in a collection called *Otzar Nechmad*.¹⁶ In 1984, Professor Yosef Dan published a photocopy of the manuscript, with a twenty-page foreword.¹⁷ To date, these publications are all we have of R. Moshe Taku's work.

A casual browsing through the manuscript, and especially through his vigorous attack on the Rambam, will certainly leave the impression that R. Moshe Taku disagrees with the principle of incorporeality which the Rambam *et al.* formulated. A careful reading, however, provides a very different understanding of his position.

The Manuscript's Authenticity

Before discussing the content of the manuscript, we must note that an objective scholar will be left with quite a bit of discomfort about the authenticity of the manuscript for the following reasons:

1. Carmoly had a sordid reputation for forgeries,¹⁸ and the fact that he was the discoverer of this manuscript does not inspire us with great confidence as to its authenticity. As much as I could determine, the manuscript seems to

15 Rambam is cited as the author of a commentary on *Iyov* instead of Ramban.

16 Ignaz Blumenfeld, ed. *Otzar Nechmad*, v. 3 (Vienna: Knoepfmachers, 1860), p. 54-99.

17 Taku, *op. cit.*, at footnote #7.

18 See Shlomo Yehudah Rappaport, Introduction to R. Shlomo Parchan, *Machberes haAruch* (Pressburg, 1844), p. 11; Gershom Scholem, "*S[efer] Sheviley dYerushalayim haMeyuchas leR. Yitzchok Chilo—Mezuyaf*" ["The Work *Sheviley dYerushalayim* Attributed to R. Yitzchok Chilo Is Forged"], *Tziyon* 6 (1934): 39-53; Meir Ish Shalom, ["Concerning the Work *Sheviley dYerushalayim* of R. Yitzchok baR. Yosef Chilo"], *Tarbitz* 6 (1935): 197-209; Yehudah Rubinstein, *HaDarom* 18 (1964); Moritz Steinschneider, *HaMazkir* 2 (1859):107; R. Yekusiel Yehudah Greenwald, *HaYehudim beHungariyah [The Jews in Hungary]*, (Jerusalem, 5729), p. 48-49; and many others.

THE CORPOREALITY WHICH NEVER WAS

have existed before Carmoly's time.¹⁹ Carmoly was—according to various biographical sketches—either the librarian of the Hebrew Division in the French National Library, or the Library was his workplace. With the “cat guarding the cream,” it would not have been too difficult for him to have “discovered” a sensational manuscript.²⁰ Moreover, he has been accused of adding to existing manuscripts and/or changing their titles.²¹ This evidence suggests that the original manuscript might have been genuine but that Carmoly might have tampered with it.

2. None of the controversial statements in the manuscript regarding corporeality are referenced in any other works.²²
3. The length of the manuscript and the ferocity of its language have no equivalent in its time and age.
4. R. Moshe Taku's attack on Rambam, R. Sa'adia Gaon, Ibn Ezra and others is quite fierce; yet, this attack is never mentioned by any of his contemporaries, nor is there any polemic directed against him. It is a

19 The French National Library supplied me the following information: “The manuscript Hébreu 711 once belonged to the Cardinal Mazarin, who served as chief minister of France from December 1642 until his death in 1661. Therefore, this manuscript arrived in France after 1642 (perhaps a decade earlier) and before 1661. It then passed into Jean-Baptiste Colbert's collection before becoming part of the library of the King of France. The cover of the binding is made of red leather and bears the coat of arms of the King of France (perhaps Louis XIV). It is very difficult to know how Mazarin bought it. On the manuscript itself, there are signatures of several prior owners.”

20 He was later fired from the Rabbinate of Brussels for “reformist tendencies.” See Moshe Katan, [“Rav Aharon Worms and His Disciple Elyakim Carmoly”], *Areshet* 2 (1960), p. 190-195.

21 See Meir Ish Shalom, “*Midrash Esser Galiyos*,” *Sinai* 43 (1959), concerning “Aktan deMar Ya'akov,” published by Carmoly, believed to be a genuine manuscript with two chapters added by Carmoly.

22 The Maharshah, in his second introduction to *Yam Shel Shlomo* on *Chulin*, quotes R. Moshe Taku as someone “who wrote against the philosophers” He then proceeds to quote a lengthy excerpt from R. Moshe Taku which is not in our version of *Kesav Tamim* or on any topic relevant to it. In the editions of the *Yam Shel Shlomo* that I have seen, there are two matters which make it unclear that the Maharshah is indeed referring to *Kesav Tamim*: 1) In referring to R. Moshe Taku, he uses the words “*kasav tamid*,” which is either a typographical error which should read *Kesav Tamim*, or it means “wrote constantly,” and does not refer to his *Kesav Tamim* at all. In addition, 2) he writes that R. Moshe Taku wrote a “*yeriah ketana*,” which he proceeds to cite, which either means “a small addendum,” referring to a chapter in *Kesav Tamim*, or else refers to an additional work written by R. Moshe Taku other than *Kesav Tamim*.

silence which is deafening. Contrast this with R. Yonah *et al.*, whose disputes with the Rambam are recorded many times in history. Was R. Moshe Taku's attack ignored because he was so unimportant? Or because he was highly respected as a halachist, but not as a worthy antagonist in theological matters? Or perhaps the silence indicates that we are mistaken in understanding his words. More pertinently, perhaps it indicates that the passages in question are bogus?²³

5. The manuscript itself, as stated, is in some disarray and Kirchheim reshuffled some pages. Professor Dan points out this fact, implying that his opinion is that the manuscript should be left as it had been. However, it appears more likely that Kirchheim's arrangement of the misordered pages is correct.

While the aforementioned points are troubling, they are not the real issue. Considering all aspects, the balance of evidence seems to allow a presumption of authenticity, at least regarding the antiquity of the manuscript. The real issues that have caused such confusion are the readings of the manuscript itself.

Misunderstandings of the Manuscript

There are two factors that, I believe, can mislead the reader of the manuscript:

1. The manuscript is an attack on R. Sa'adia Gaon *et al.* An attack on another's position does not usually lend itself to proper exposition of one's own position. A lawyer attempts in every way to find holes in his opponent's position but does not reveal his own position until the last moment. So, too, a polemic usually suffers from an excess of description of the antagonist's weaknesses, without clearly stating the polemicist's own position.

23 Professor Yosef Dan, in his foreword, p. 26, is troubled by the deafening silence and suggests that his contemporaries did not wish to make an issue of R. Moshe Taku's position so as to preserve unity among the Jewish people. But conspiracy theories are almost always fictional, especially when they are applied simultaneously to many Rabbonim in various countries and times. The contemporaries of R. Moshe Taku were fiercely argumentative (*cf.* the aforementioned polemic against the Rambam) and at least one of them should have expressed some sentiment for or against such a controversial theory.

2. There is a short preface to the work by Kirchheim. Many people have probably read this preface but then only skimmed through the work itself (it is not an easy read). Even if they bothered to actually read the work itself, they were surely heavily biased by the preface. Kirchheim was a formerly Orthodox Jew, a *shochet*, who had turned Reform. Like all apostates, he needed to shore up his conversion by attacking his previously held convictions. Thus, he presents the following argument in his preface (paraphrased): “Here is the work of a great halachist and Talmudist, who has the most benighted views about God, i.e., that He has a body, etc. This only shows you that without the blessed study of secular philosophy, one can end up with the crudest beliefs. Maimonides, blessed by being an intellectual (*maskil*) too, had the best of both worlds.”²⁴

Kirchheim’s evaluation of *Kesav Tamim* has been eagerly seized upon by many people whose attitudes resonate with Kirchheim’s message, or who simply enjoy its contrariness. To his credit, Professor Dan is not happy with Kirchheim’s analysis and offers a different explanation (described later) which, while it contains a germ of truth, is, as presented, rather lame.

Re-evaluating R. Moshe Taku’s Position

I will try to present what I feel are the main points of R. Moshe Taku’s thesis. First, I will offer a preface which will explain why corporeality is an untenable position. Then I will offer R. Moshe Taku’s five points of contention with R. Sa’adia Gaon *et al.* These are: 1) the limits of reason in theological inquiry; 2) the appropriate explanation of anthropomorphisms; 3) the untenability of interpreting *Shechinah* (the Divine Presence) as a *kavod nivra* (a created essence); 4) R. Sa’adia Gaon *et al.*’s acceptance of allegory as an accepted approach to interpretation of the Torah; and 5) the concept of God’s immanence.

²⁴ In Blumenfeld, ed., *op. cit.*, at footnote #16, p. 55-56.

Corporeality's Incompatibility with Torah

The understanding that God has a sort of body puts Him, *chas ve-shalom*, in the same category as an idol. The Torah's most central message, repeated endlessly in both the Torah and *Nevi'im*, is its vehement and total negation of idols, which are defined as physical beings held to be divine. If God has a body of some sort, then belief in God as opposed to belief in idols becomes a question of which body is the true God. God is no longer an absolute category, but a relative valuation. No one reading the Torah can honestly conclude that such a belief is possible.

Secondly, the Torah itself, speaking in as clear a language as possible, warns the Jewish people after the events on Sinai that "you shall be extremely careful not to make images,"²⁵ as "you have seen no image whatsoever at Sinai."²⁶ This is as clear and as unequivocal a statement as possible that God has no image.

But the most powerful reason why the notion of corporeality is an untenable position is that it leads to logical absurdities. A primitive idol worshipper's beliefs may be ridiculed, but he can at least state them in a meaningful statement. Thus, he may state, "This rock/sun/person has extraordinary powers." We may show that it is not so, but at least his statement is a linguistically meaningful statement.

Of course, no one would consider R. Moshe Taku to be a crass idolater, but, at most, rather only a sophisticated corporealist. It is usually taken to mean that He is some sort of body of a very refined (fire-like) material that resembles the human body. But why would a being living in the Heavens above have a human-like body, which is designed to live on earth. Why would there be "feet"²⁷ rather than wings? Why a "nose" when He obviously does not need oxygen? How can a specific entity—refined as it may be—be in different places simultaneously? At least the idolater does not attribute infinite power to a finite being!

This is simply the very tip of the iceberg in reducing the concept of a corporeal God to meaningless gibberish. If we are not willing to impose any boundaries to the entity that we are describing, then we have simply not described

25 *Devorim* 4:16-18.

26 *Devorim* 4:15.

27 *Shemos* 24:10.

anything. To “define” comes from the word “*fin*,” which is to limit. When I define something, I give it its boundaries that set it apart from any other entity.

To say that something is “physical” but not to allow it any physical properties and limitations is to play a meaningless word game. If because of the above reasons non-idolatrous corporeality is meaningless, then what is R. Moshe Taku’s position?

R. Moshe Taku’s Positions

Of the over fifty available pages of the *Kesav Tamim* manuscript, the majority consist of quotes from R. Sa’adia *et al.*, or citations from *Chazal* and *Midrashim* supporting R. Moshe Taku’s position. However, we can identify approximately fifty passages that give us a sense of his own position on these matters.

1. The Limits of Rational Exploration

R. Moshe Taku posits that the Mishna in *Chagiga* (“Whoever investigates... what is above, what is underneath...should never have come into the world”²⁸) places limitations on rational inquiry into any aspect of Divine existence. Any question and any subsequent answer (no matter how religiously motivated) are wrong, and get us nowhere. Just as a fork cannot be used to eat soup, so too is the human mind unable to deal with the Divine.

Thus writes R. Moshe:²⁹

p.59. There are those who are wise in their own eyes who invent ideas which they project as *Ma’aseh Bereyshit* (Work of Creation).³⁰ Each one invents different ideas, and it would have been best had they all kept silent.

p. 64. Our Rabbis taught us not to expound on the matter of God’s name, even though one intends this for His honor and glory.

p. 71. Since God is totally hidden and appears only to angels in a manner which they perceive, and so to His prophets...how does a human indulge in contemplating about God’s essence?

...It is nonsense to contemplate the issue of God’s contracting His Self.

28 *Chagiga* 2:1.

29 Page numbers refer to the Kirchheim edition, not to the manuscript.

30 *Chagiga* 2:1.

p. 77. The Rabbis taught us to contemplate His great and wondrous creations, called *Ma'aseh Bereyshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* (Work of the Chariot), but who can possibly enter the “fire that consumes fire” and survive?

p. 83. We cannot contemplate what the Creator was before creation, for the essence of God is not known to anyone, not even to the angels.

p. 97. How much blasphemy they have spouted! They thought that they would understand the essence of God with their simple and limited mind and imagined that they would reach thereby a bond with the Divine.

2. The Correct Approach to Dealing with Anthropomorphisms

In many places, R. Moshe Taku emphasizes the infinity of the Divine. Thus, he says the following:

p. 58. And that which has been written,³¹ “He rides on a cherub and appears on the wings of the wind”—really? Does He need to ride on cherubs and winds? Hasn't He created them? What does He need them for?...Rather, it is a way for Him to demonstrate His glory to the angels and to the Jewish people.

p. 62. The images are a way of recognizing an aspect of God's power and luminescence that is in reality infinite.

p. 79. God's essence and greatness cannot be evaluated, and nothing can be compared to Him.

p. 80. Does He need cherubs to ride on? There are no walls before Him because He created it all, and distance has no meaning with regard to Him.

p. 82. The true believer believes that all was created by Divine will, and that the Creator Himself is above the highest of heavens.

p. 85. R. Eliezer HaKalir so appropriately wrote, “It appears that the angels lift the throne, but in reality it is He who lifts them all.”

p. 86. Are people fools to think that God needs a throne, and that it is possible for a throne to contain Him? Rather, He created it and used it to show the heavenly hosts the glory that they can comprehend.

Considering all these citations which show clearly that R. Moshe Taku does not believe in God's corporeality, what does he really believe? What is his approach to God's essence?

It appears that he believes that the Torah and *Chazal* defined for us the attributes of God in terms incomprehensible to us. And despite their being

³¹ *Shmuel II* 22:11.

inherently incomprehensible, these terms reveal many truths, so long as we understand them appropriately. Let us take a few examples from the world of mathematics to illustrate this.

1. Simple arithmetic deals with concrete objects that can be defined. Thus, two apples and two apples will equal four apples. Algebra is a refined process, where we know only certain aspects about a number “x,” such as, for example, that a certain number “x”, when squared and divided by another unknown number “y”, will yield the result “z.” I admittedly know nothing about the numbers “x,” “y” and “z.” But, as long as I apply the given knowns about these entities and I follow the rules of algebra, the extrapolated statements will be true.
2. Let us go to a more complex variety of numbers, namely, negative numbers. We cannot easily define negative numbers since there are no negative numbers in nature, and they certainly do not define any objects. Yet when we follow the rules governing operations of negative numbers, we will come up with applicable truths. Thus, if I take out ten loans of \$100K each [(10)(\$100K)], I will owe one million dollars.
3. Perhaps the most difficult of numbers to define is “1”, the square root of minus 1. There is no number in our universe that multiplied by itself will yield minus 1. Yet it fits perfectly in equations and helps us ascertain truths in many areas.
4. Similarly, the concept of “instantaneous speed” in calculus is essentially meaningless, but yields eminently tangible truths.
5. In the same manner, R. Moshe Taku is telling us that we need to take the words which the Torah gives us and apply them within their appropriate parameters. Thus, if it says, “God’s eyes are upon it,”³² we must apply the concept of Divine eyes within the appropriate parameters and conclude that we are constantly being observed. We do not—and cannot—ask, question, or contemplate what those eyes are. We have no tools for that contemplation, and it is like contemplating the value of “1.”

What is the point of possessing information which is unfathomable? To gain a sense of the utility of such knowledge, imagine the following: A group of very bright people, who were unfortunately born blind, attend a school designed to help them prepare for life. They have been taught to dress themselves immaculately. They have no conception of color, but each of their garments is labeled

³² *Devorim* 11:20.

for color with small Braille characters. The problem now arises of how to teach them to coordinate the various colors of their clothing.

Two teachers approach the problem in different ways. The first is philosophically oriented. He describes the "colors" by analogy. Thus, "red" is described to the students as "the beating of a drum" or "the taste of hot pepper," while "blue" is described as "a waltz" or "the feel of smooth cream." The idea behind this method is that translating the sensation of color into terms of hearing or taste will enable the blind students to draw their own analogies, so that "red" will be used to express excitement and "blue" to express calmness.

The second teacher is more practical and goal-oriented. He simply drills into the students a list of which color matches which under which circumstances. If his list is exhaustive and the rules are carefully followed, they will always be perfectly dressed, despite their lacking the slightest idea regarding the nature of colors in general.³³

This second approach describes the approach used by R. Moshe Taku. We use the terms describing God, apply them within the confines allowed and we arrive at correct answers, without having the ability to probe the essence of the terms.³⁴ (See Addendum below.)

3. *Kavod Nivra*

A close corollary to this issue is R. Sa'adia's concept of *kavod nivra*, his definition of the places in the Torah where the Divine *Shechinah* appeared to man. What is this *Shechinah*? R. Sa'adia says that it is an apparition created to mark the spot where and the time when *Hashem* lets us know that He is satisfied or dissatisfied with us.³⁵ *Shechinah*, then, is a created essence. Ramban³⁶

33 Professor Dan, on page 15, states that while R. Moshe did not believe in corporeality *per se*, he endured it as "*yissurim shel ahavah*" of the Divine text. It sounds as if he is saying that R. Moshe accepted the text "warts and all." This explanation is not very convincing or comforting; and its meaning is not even at all clear!

34 It is fascinating to note that a similar difference of approach emerged later amongst the kabbalists. Some, like Ramchal, made their focus the translation of kabbalistic terms by analogy to philosophic concepts. Others vehemently disagreed and saw the focus of studying Kabbalah as understanding the structure of the truths that the *Zohar* or Ari-zal revealed and deriving the necessary *kavanos* or practices even without understanding them.

35 *Emunos veDey'os*, sect. 2, chap. 10-11.

36 *Bereyshiv* 46:1.

argues vehemently against this approach, noting the many places where the Jews bowed to the *Shechinah* and treated it as Divine. The Ramban, however, is not forthcoming in describing his own definition of *Shechinah*. Certainly, the Ramban cannot be accused of being a corporealist.

Let us make the following analogy to explain what R. Moshe Taku's position is. Imagine a traffic light being simultaneously perceived by three people: one with perfect eyesight, one with impairment of vision, and one who is blind. The one with perfect eyesight sees the light as it is. The one who has impaired vision might see a purple light that looks like a frog. The blind person knows only of a beeping signal that has been installed at the corner to indicate that the light is on. Ramban and R. Moshe Taku feel that the *Shechinah* is analogous to the second person. He is seeing the light, but only in the grotesquely distorted way that he is able to see it. But it is the light itself. The beeping signal that the blind person hears is analogous to R. Sa'adia's version of the *Shechinah*; it is a corollary marker that gives correct information about the light, but is not the light itself.

This analogy, I believe, demonstrates the conceptual divide between the opinions.

4. Allegorization

What drove R. Moshe Taku's fury? If we are correct in our analysis, there is not all that much difference between his thesis and that of all the others. So why his torrents of fury?

I believe that R. Moshe Taku felt that R. Sa'adia Gaon *et al.* were adopting the approach of allegorization of the Torah. This approach, he felt, had been absorbed from secular philosophers and was, in fact, or could become, *kefirah* (blasphemy) in the mind of the unsophisticated reader.

Let us describe the approach of allegorization. As thinkers began disbelieving the facts as presented by religion and religious works, they were presented with a great personal dilemma. Intuitively and emotionally, they believed in the truth and truths embedded in religion—but not in the facts. They certainly felt that society must believe and uphold religious values. The solution was to turn the Bible and religion into a fable, a false story with a truthful message.

When one reads the passage by R. Sa'adia Gaon—echoed by the Ramban—that “He has no speech nor motion nor pain nor joy, and He is inside everything, and filthy places affect Him not in the least,” does it not suggest some-

thing of this approach? When the Rambam uses the word “*moshol*” (parable) to explain anthropomorphic terms,³⁷ may one not translate the word “*moshol*” as “fable” or “allegory”? After all, the word “*moshol*,” as used in the opening verse of *Mishley*, does mean “fable”!

This is the idea which R. Moshe Taku fought so vehemently. He had a sense that, despite the immense greatness in Torah of R. Sa’adia Gaon and the Rambam, a strain of the impersonal Aristotelian god, who exists as an impersonal being, more similar to a concept than to an entity, had crept into their philosophy. Even if they did not mean it in quite this way, certainly the reader might very likely be misled into thinking so.

5. God’s Immanence

A corollary of stripping God of His traits is the concept of God’s immanence, the notion that He is “everywhere.” While at first glance this idea sounds wonderfully “religious,” let us for a moment consider the implications of that statement. If God exists equally in holy and profane places, then good and evil lose their meaning. By being over-generous with the expansion of God’s presence, we eradicate the quality described as “finding favor in God’s eyes” by performing good deeds and eschewing evil ones.

In truth, this argument has later echoes in the dispute between the *Nefesh HaChaim* and his anonymous Chassidic target. *Chassidus* had preached God’s all-pervasive presence as a fuller *emunah* and as an encouragement for the lowliest of Jews to elevate himself. The *Nefesh HaChaim* counters that Halacha clearly distinguishes between a *makom kadosh* (a holy place), a *makom chol* (a secular place), a *makom metunaf* (a profane place) and a *makom naki* (a clean place). An over-eager desire to be all-inclusive robs us of the most vital distinction between good and evil. Without this distinction, there can be no Mitzvos and it is, therefore, an essentially false idea.

Summary

The so-called *Kesav Tamim* manuscript of R. Moshe Taku that we have

37 Introduction to *Moreh Nevuchim*.

before us is of troubled provenance. But even if we accept that it is R. Moshe Taku's work, or another early authority, it does not say what it has been quoted as saying. It is a difficult read since the language is one of the fury of attack rather than that of precise formulation. But after many readings, the following points emerge from the work:

1. Because of the limitations of human reason, any type of reasoned discussion of God Himself is impossible and off limits. Thus, the Rambam's and R. Sa'adia Gaon's very discussion of what is meant by "God's hand, etc." is beyond rational understanding.
2. What we are permitted to do is to use anthropomorphisms in the Torah within the parameters that the Torah and *Chazal* have set for us.
3. The approach that R. Sa'adia Gaon *et al.* used reeks heavily of the secular approach of allegorization. They are either guilty of it, or they will certainly mislead others.

As in many controversies between great persons, this argument presents two extremes of a single truth whose resolution requires a delicate balance. If we think of God as a caring Father of sorts, loving good, despising evil, rejoicing in our happiness and distressed at our suffering, we risk turning God into a human-like entity with human-like feelings. On the other hand, the more we focus on His transcendence, the less real He becomes to us and the distinction between good and evil disappears. We have no choice but to somehow balance these two truths. For it is within the synthesis of these two opposing truths that the absolute truth lies.

...

ADDENDUM

The Approach of Rashi and Tosafos

Although this article deals with R. Moshe Taku, I believe that a similar approach was used by the commentators Rashi and *Tosafos* in their approach to *Aggadata* (the exegetical parts of the Talmud and Midrash).

They are *baaley peshat*, meaning that they deal with the simple meanings of the words and the *moshol* (parable) itself, not with their possible applied meanings. They do not examine the philosophy and theology of the *Aggadata*. They simply check the consistency of the tale, both in its primary site (*Rashi*) and in the broad Talmudic literature (*Tosafos*). They offer no interpretation of any kind, but believe that *Aggadata* must be consistent with respect to the *moshol* used.

Let us show the seeming inconsistency in Rashi's approach, and then see how Rashi himself has given us the key to understanding his approach. On the one hand, Rashi unequivocally rejects anthropomorphism. The most explicit place is probably *Shemos* 15:8:

By the wind of your nostrils. ... The verse speaks in the language of "as if it could be," i.e., the Divine *Shechinah* is likened to a king of flesh and blood in order to allow the ears of the [human] beings to hear it in a way that he can understand it; like a person who is angry from whose nostrils wind emanates....

Similarly, Rashi clearly states in *Shemos* 19:18, 31:17 and 20:11; *Devorim* 30:3; *Yeshayahu* 22:13; and *Yechezkel* 1:3 that these anthropomorphisms are metaphors. So, too, does he state in *Berachos* 59a, *s.v.* "anacha"; *Megillah* 21a, *s.v.* "kevayachol". Yet Rashi will often explain every line of a passage of *Aggadata* without offering a hint that it is a metaphor.

Similarly, *Tosafos* asks questions on the simple meaning of an *Aggadata*, such as in *Berachos* 7a where mention is made of God's anger lasting a split second. *Tosafos* asks: "What can He possibly say in that split second?" and *Tosafos* answers, "*Kaleym* (Destroy them)." If *Tosafos* understood this passage to be a metaphor, what is the point of the question?³⁸

The answer is given by Rashi himself at the beginning of *Shir HaShirim*³⁹ and I think that this is the key to appropriate understanding of this approach:

God spoke one, but we heard two (*Tehillim* 62:12). A verse has many meanings, but every verse retains its elementary meaning. **And even though the prophets spoke their words in metaphor and simile, one must explain the metaphor as well, in the order of the verses.**

38 See also *Tosafos* to *Chagiga* 12a and 13a.

39 *Shir HaShirim* 1:1. Some editions have this as a separate introductory phrase; some have it before the first Rashi.

Thus, Rashi makes it clear that, even though the core meaning of prophecies may be allegorical, one still needs to explain the metaphor as well!

It follows, then, that both Rashi and *Tosafos* believed that the *peshuto shel mikra* (the simple meaning of the verse) of the Prophets and the *Aggadata* were both Torah in their own right. One needs to reconcile the meaning of the *Aggadata* with the local *peshat* (Rashi) and with other parallel passages in the Talmud (*Tosafos*). As we explained above regarding R. Moshe Taku's approach, since Torah inextricably binds *peshat* and *Aggadata* to each other, any truths derived on the *peshat* level will reveal many inner and deeper truths as well.

Meaning of Communicated Words

One more thought on the "Taku" approach: Abarbanel explains why the Torah calls *nega'im* "leprosy" when in fact it is not leprosy. He says that since our imagination is as repulsed by *nega'im* as by leprosy, it is appropriate to call it "leprosy."⁴⁰

I believe that the Abarbanel is telling us a deep truth about "expressed language" versus "communicated language." For instance, imagine that a young child had been burnt by fire earlier in his or her lifetime, and has been accordingly traumatized. This same child is now standing at the edge of a swift and dangerous river, about to plunge in. Should I warn him by yelling "fire" or by yelling "water"? Obviously, I should yell "fire," despite the error of fact. What is important in this case is not the scientific exactness of the term; rather, the conveyed meaning is important, and the word "fire" conveys the danger much better than the word "water."

When we think about terminology with which to describe *Gehinnom*, we are confronted with a similar dilemma. If we describe it as consisting of a fire of physical flames, we are technically wrong. Yet the feeling of horror is accurate; for *Gehinnom* is certainly a place of tremendous suffering for those who have done wrong. But if we say, "It is not a real fire, just a spiritual pain similar to physical pain," the effect is mitigated. Technically, we are right, but the emotional message meant to be conveyed is not transmitted.⁴¹

So many Jews who followed the literal translation of the words of *Chazal*

⁴⁰ Abarbanel, *Vayikra* 13: 47.

⁴¹ Rambam, in his introduction to *Moreh Nevuchim* makes a similar point.

were genuinely *yirey Hashem* (God-fearing people) who acted righteously throughout their lives. If they erred in some fine theological point, the Great Theologian Himself has surely set them straight. But those many who philosophized and reduced God to some vague and abstract entity did not have the emotional strength to enable them to stand strong in the face of temptation. Who is to say which of these two approaches is the error on the side of caution?

Let us conclude with a quote by the great 15th century philosopher, R. Yitzchak Arma'ah, author of *Akeidas Yitzchak*:

The revelation [at Sinai] taught [the Jewish people] and left an eternal memory that God looks down from the heavens onto the dwellers of the earth, to pay each person for his actions....It teaches us that man does not live by philosophical expositions, but only by keeping God's word do they live forever. This is what the divine [Tanna] stated: "Know what is above you: an eye that sees, an ear that hears, and all your deeds are entered into a book."⁴² And even if the masses take this in its literal sense, no harm is done, so long as it brings them to a closer sense of God's Providence. For doubt or [abstruse] philosophic discourse takes them away from their simple faith and does not bring them [instead] to any better place; rather they are left losing out from both ends.⁴³

42 *Avos* 2:1.

43 *Akeydas Yitzchak* 45.