In the previous chapter, we highlighted a famous dispute between Rambam and Ra’avad as to whether a person who believes that God possesses a physical body or form is considered to be a heretic. Since Rambam is popularly regarded as the figurehead of a more rationalist approach to Judaism, it has sometimes been suggested that it was he who established Judaism’s strong rejection of the contention that God has a body or form.

This position is endorsed in the opening chapters of a relatively recent and influential book, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology*,¹ by Professor Marc Shapiro, which attempts to demonstrate the wide range of dispute which once existed over what are now regarded as core Jewish beliefs. Shapiro proceeds to challenge the commonly expressed notion that rejection of any of Rambam’s thirteen principles of faith should constitute heresy and a loss of one’s portion in *Olam Haba*. In this chapter, I will examine

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Shapiro’s claims regarding the consistency of Rabbinic belief in Divine corporeality, before proceeding, in the next chapter, to discuss the broader question of the concept of dispute in core theological beliefs.

**Preceding Rambam: The Jewish Tradition of an Incorporeal Deity**

While Rambam formulated the thirteen principles of faith in the twelfth century, the core elements of these principles, including belief in a single, non-corporeal Deity, can be identified throughout the millennia of Jewish tradition. Rabbeinu Bachye ibn Paquda, in his *Chovot HaLevavot*—written almost a century before Rambam’s birth—strongly endorses a speculative philosophical approach within which God’s unity and non-corporeality are considered indispensable to monotheistic faith. Leading Rabbinic figures of the generation which preceded him also firmly rejected the notion of a physical Deity. In his commentary to a Gemara, Rabbeinu Chananel cites several explicitly anthropomorphic biblical verses before stating:

> It is evident that “seeing” refers to visualising through the mind [literally heart], rather than the eye, since it is impossible to say that the image of God can be seen through eyes, for it says, “To whom can you liken Me that I should be his equal?” (Yeshayah 40:25). Instead, this is seeing with the mind.

These earlier authorities themselves appear to be following the Geonic tradition of allegorical interpretation of anthropomorphic passages. Commenting on an anthropomorphic Aggadah, Rabbeinu Nissim Gaon explains:

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2 Throughout that work’s *Sha’ar Yichud*.

3 *Berachot* 6a.

4 The term “Gaon” is more than just an ancient equivalent of “Rabbi.” Rather, it was a title generally accorded to the heads of the two major Babylonian academies, Sura and Pumbedita, the leaders and transmitters of Jewish thought and scholarship.

5 In these upcoming passages, Rav Hai Gaon and Rav Nissim Gaon go much further than merely rejecting the notion of a corporeal deity. They argue against the attribution to God of any human emotion or character trait. The difficulty of Divine attributes is discussed in detail in Chapter 16.
No one doubts that it is wrong to compare God to any creature, and consequently there cannot be with Him any [such physical manifestations as] laughing, weeping, sighing or the shedding of tears... in every case where the Rabbis have used such terms they did not mean them in the literal sense... [F]or as the Torah spoke in the ordinary language of man... so were also the similar utterances employed by the Aggadists.6

Rav Hai Gaon writes similarly that

there is no doubt that God is incomparable to any creature and that no laughter, weeping, sighing, tears, or distress apply to Him. Anything the rabbis said that implies as such is not meant literally but as an allegory and a parable to visible things that we know... Just as the Torah spoke in the language of men when the prophets used such anthropomorphic expressions such as the “eyes of God,” the “hand of God”... so too in the case of Aggadic statements.7

According to the tenth-century Gaon, Rav Sa’adiah, any mention of God being seen is clearly allegorical since God is not physical.8 Rav Sa’adiah provides a detailed list of the various connotations and meanings of different anthropomorphic phrases, stating emphatically that those who imagine that God has a body “are like those without a God.”9

These Geonic statements themselves are a continuation of the long-standing Oral Law tradition which interprets anthropomorphic passages of the Written Torah allegorically. The most notable proponent of this allegorical methodology is the Targum of Onkelos—a student of the Tannaim Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua—who consistently took phrases in the Torah which suggest that God has

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6 Quoted by “Kotev” in Ein Yaakov to Berachot 59a. See also Rabbeinu Nissim’s Sefer Mafte’ach quoted by Netziv, Ha’amek Davar, Shemot 24:11.
7 Otzar HaGeonim, Berachot 59a. See further Chapter 14.
8 Emunot VeDe’ot, Ma’amar Beit.
9 Ibid. At the end of Chapter 7 we analyze a similar statement from Rambam.
a form and rendered them figuratively. The Gemara powerfully endorses Onkelos’ approach, asserting that Onkelos’ treatment of the Torah’s text can be traced back to Sinai, and that anyone who rejects Onkelos’ interpretation in favor of a more literal rendering is considered a fraudster and a heretic. In addition to the Targum of Onkelos, which renders the Chumash into Aramaic, the Targum Yonatan performs a similar task across the entire Tanach, guiding readers away from a literal understanding of anthropomorphic passages. Of particular significance is a statement of the Gemara that the Targum Yonatan—with its clear rejections of God’s corporeality—is itself based on a strong tradition from the prophets Chaggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, who lived over 1,500 years before Rambam formulated his principles of faith.

A sensitive student of Talmudic and Tannaic texts will be aware of numerous further subtle hints of Rabbinic opposition to the literal understanding of anthropomorphic material. These include the frequent insertion of the word “kebeyachol” (literally “as if it were possible”) to denote that the text is not to be understood literally, as well as anecdotes such as those showing that God’s essence was considered too far removed from human comprehension for any praise to be appropriate.

This Rabbinic approach to allegorizing anthropomorphism can rely on strong scriptural support from King Shlomo’s dedication speech at

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10 See Moreh Nevuchim 1:48.
11 Megillah 3b and the commentary of Maharsha there. The Gemara on Berachot 8a–b also required the text of the weekly Torah reading to be read with the Targum. In Chapter 49 we examine Targum Onkelos in more detail and ask why the Torah had been written in such an apparently misleading manner in the first place.
12 Rabbeinu Chananel and Me’iri explain that the heresy is the literal rendering of passages which attribute physicality to God.
13 Or perhaps Targum Yerushalmi.
14 See Moreh Nevuchim 1:28, where Rambam cites examples such as Zechariah 14:4.
15 Megillah 3a.
16 See, for example, Mechilta, Beshalach 6, where this term is applied to the notion that God rode a horse. A Bar Ilan computer search of midrashim and Aggadot produced many hundreds of such examples.
17 See Chapter 16.
the inauguration of the First Mikdash: “Can God really dwell on Earth? ... the Heavens of Heavens cannot contain You,”\textsuperscript{18} and the Torah’s description of the Sinai revelation which emphasizes how no physical form was perceived.\textsuperscript{19} Jewish tradition maintains that these truths were received as part of the Torah at Sinai. These very same truths were proclaimed by Shlomo in his dedication speech, and guarded by Onkelos before being transmitted through the Amoraic and Geonic periods to Rambam, who recorded them in his principles of faith.

**Jewish Beliefs Viewed from Classical Sources**

The sources that we have examined, which show a clear and consistent Rabbinic tradition of rendering anthropomorphic biblical phrases allegorically, are reinforced by many historians from outside the tradition. Most prominent among these is the Jewish scholar, historian, and hagiographer Josephus Flavius, whose works spanned the period immediately before and after the destruction of the Second Mikdash. In his *Contra Apionem*,\textsuperscript{20} Josephus describes how the Jewish conception of God is of an almighty, all-powerful, and incomprehensible Being who cannot be described, much less seen:

\begin{quote}
Superior to all mortal conceptions in pulchritude; and, though known to us by His power, yet unknown to us as to His essence.
\end{quote}

Josephus makes a fascinating contrast between the way in which the “the wisest among the Grecians” held a similar perception of God but dared not disclose it to “the body of the people.” The Jewish Lawgiver, by contrast, not only succeeded in teaching these notions to his contemporaries, but “so firmly imprinted this faith in God upon all their posterity that it could never be removed.”

\textsuperscript{18} *Melachim I* 8:27. In Chapter 34, we examine the concept of the Shechinah dwelling in the physical world.

\textsuperscript{19} *Devarim* 4:15.

Given this overwhelming theme of Josephus’ argument, it is most disappointing that Shapiro limits himself to a single short and unrepresentative excerpt in support of his simply-stated claim that Josephus is “part of the anthropomorphic tradition.”

By his works and bounty He is plainly seen, indeed more manifest than all else, but His form and magnitude surpass our powers of description...[emphasis mine] The like of Him we have never seen, we do not imagine, and it is impious to conjecture.

Viewing Josephus’ remarks within the broader context of his work, in particular his passionate proclamations of the “Greek sophistication” of Jewish conceptions of God, it would be more accurate to explain Josephus’ statement to mean that since “His essence is unknown to us,” we cannot even talk of Him having form or magnitude. If Josephus intends, as Shapiro seems to argue, that God does indeed possess a physical form, it is not easily understood why such a physical form should surpass all human powers of description and even imagination.

A significant advantage of interpreting this comment of Josephus as we have suggested is that his opinion is thereby aligned with an impressive array of Latin and Greek historians (as well as the Jewish historian Philo) quoted by Shapiro on the following page—all of whom declare the non-corporeality of God in ancient Jewish belief.

The Limits of Superficially Presented Sources

In addition to quoting Josephus out of context, Shapiro makes further flawed efforts to reveal opinions of Divine corporeality within the Jewish tradition, this being part of his greater attempt to challenge the binding nature of core Jewish beliefs.

21 The Limits of Orthodox Theology, p. 52.
22 Book 2, chap. 23.
23 The “Whiston” translation that I have used (Kregel Publications 1999), reads “but as to his form and magnitude, he is most obscure,” which is closer to my suggestion. Shapiro does not cite his version.
Several pages are devoted to citing Aggadic passages which describe God in physical terms, with the possibility of a figurative interpretation presented as a radical Maimonidean innovation. But is this accurate? As we demonstrated earlier in this chapter, Jewish tradition dating back to ancient times has consistently rejected the literal rendering of anthropomorphism. Yet this strong pre-Maimonidean tradition does not merit a mention in Shapiro’s presentation of the Aggadot—or even in a footnote to it. Instead the reader is repeatedly offered “revealing” Aggadot, which are “very difficult to understand metaphorically.”24 The reader is not made aware of the near-unanimity in Jewish tradition of treating much of the Aggadic material as esoteric,25 and of therefore not taking it at face value. If Shapiro feels justified to conclude26 from his selected Aggadot that it is “impossible to deny that a widespread rabbinic view was that God does, in fact, have a physical body,” would he be willing to draw similar conclusions from other Aggadot regarding Rabbinic belief in the moon speaking and entering into a debate with God? That the letters of the Hebrew alphabet engaged in a passionate dispute as to which should be entitled to begin the Torah? What about the Aggadah that Nebuchadnetzar’s foreskin extended three hundred cubits when he attempted to sodomise Tzidkiyah—are we also to accord Rabbinic belief to its literal reading?

In view of the strong Jewish tradition which rejected as absurd the notion of a physical deity, the suggestion that the esoteric Aggadic material written by Tannaim and Amoraim be understood to support Divine corporeality should be regarded with extreme caution. Recall

24 Rambam’s Moreh Nevuchim, as well as Rav Sa’adiah Gaon’s Emunot VeDe’ot (which preceded it by over 250 years), deal systematically with the metaphorical interpretation of the examples cited by Shapiro.
25 See Chapter 14.
26 While we may be willing to follow Ra’avad’s charitable lead in forgiving those who are unaware of the esoteric meanings of Aggadic passages and therefore understand them at face value, it is hard to extend this generosity to Shapiro, who has in the past boldly proposed reading whole swathes of the book of Bereishit metaphorically. See Marc Shapiro, “Science and Torah,” Mail.Jewish Mailing List, October 22, 1994, http://www.ottmall.com/mj_ht_arch/v16/mj_v16i13.html#CCL. We examine propositions such as this in Chapters 29 and 66.
that these Rabbinic authors belong to the very generations described by Josephus and several Roman and Greek historians as believing “that God does not partake of any figure.”

Perhaps the most pointed retort to Shapiro’s treatment of these Aggadot emerges from a passage in the Jerusalem Talmud which advises that Aggadot should not be taught to unlearned or haughty people. The reason for this, explains Rabbi David Hirschel Fränkel (in his Korban Ha’edah commentary), is that such people will be inclined to take these profound texts at face value, mocking what they understand superficially to be its strange and shallow teachings, rather than having the humility to accept their hidden philosophical and theological depths. Such prescient statements of the Sages are not however cited by Shapiro in order to provide any degree of context to the Aggadot he quotes.

**Medieval Corporealism or Kabbalistic Metaphor?**

Having attempted to demonstrate the existence of Rabbinic belief in a corporeal Divinity at the times of the Mishnah, Shapiro passes in relative silence over the intervening eras of the Geonim and early Rishonim, with their strong and unambiguous rejection of any literal rendering of anthropomorphic phrases. The growing popularity of Kabbalah in the thirteenth century, however, with its opaque terminology and complex conceptions of Divine dynamics, provided a new opportunity to investigate the presence of corporeal beliefs within the Jewish tradition.

Unfortunately for Shapiro’s readers, rather than receiving a balanced and comprehensive appraisal of this subject, they are treated to a series of carefully selected quotes, with little attempt made to tackle the esoteric implications they contain. One particular example stands out.

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27 Quoted from Tacitus (55–117 CE), cited on page 53 of Marc Shapiro’s book.
28 Pesachim 5:3.
29 Printed in the margins of the Talmud Yerushalmi.
30 An exception here is the commentary of Rashi, whom we will discuss below.
31 The Limits of Orthodox Theology, p. 40.
cherry-picked from the *Pardes Rimonim* of Rav Moshe Cordovero—a single sentence from the midst of a cryptic mystical work:

*At the start of the emanation, the Ein Sof, King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, emanated ten Sefirot, which are from His essence, are one with Him and He and they are all one complete unity.*

The sentence as quoted appears to support Marc Shapiro’s contention that the Kabbalistic system implies a lack of unity of God, since the ten separate *Sefirot*—each with its own distinct character—are considered to be part of His essence. This, writes Shapiro, “is impossible to reconcile with the simple, unknowable, Maimonidean Deity.” What Shapiro neglects to mention, however, is that, in a lengthy continuation of the same chapter of *Pardes Rimonim*, Rav Cordovero emphatically and repeatedly rejects the very conclusion which Shapiro draws from his words:

*There can be no change in God [literally, the Emanator] and no division within Him which would justify the assertion that He is divided into parts in these ten Sefirot, for change and division is not to be found within Him...*[emphasis mine]*

*It can be compared to water which is divided into variously colored [translucent] vessels...the water, despite its natural lack of color, will appear to bear the color of the various vessels*

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32 *Pardes Rimonim* 4:4.

33 In Rambam’s thought, a lack of unity is synonymous with corporeality. See *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* 1:7.

34 While Shapiro does state simply that Kabbalists “never regarded the doctrine of the *Sefirot* as doing violence to God’s absolute unity,” Rav Cordovero’s explanation—that the *Sefirot* exist only in human perception—is omitted. This is unfortunate, since Rav Cordovero’s elucidation of the nature of *Sefirot* would have provided a strong counterweight to most of Shapiro’s remaining allegations against Kabbalah, such as the implications he draws from the concept of prayer to the *Sefirot*. Shapiro uses the fact that Kabbalists will “pray to” the *Sefirot* to enhance his assertion that Kabbalah undermines both the principle of God’s unity and the fundamental principle that prayers must be directed only to God. Rav Cordovero’s explanation that the *Sefirot* are just different ways of describing our impressions of a single Deity is therefore of primary relevance.
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in which it is contained... [This change in appearance] is solely from the external perspective of the one viewing the vessels, not within the water itself. So too is the matter of the Sefirot... There is no change in the spreading Essence [i.e., God] except for in the view of the beholder...”

Rav Cordovero makes it abundantly clear that the entire system of apparently distinct Sefirot exists only in our external perception of God who, despite His absolute unity, relates to humanity and the physical world in diverse ways.

A serious attempt to reconcile the Kabbalistic system of Sefirot with belief in God’s absolute unity and incorporeality would also have drawn on foundational Kabbalistic texts such as Rav Yosef Gikatilla’s Sha’arei Orah, whose introduction specifically addresses this matter. Stating that it is an “important principle that the true essence of God is unfathomable to any other being,” he then writes on the subject of anthropomorphism:

>All of those matters that we read of in the Torah such as [God’s] hands, feet, ears, and eyes, what are they? Know and trust that even if these matters appear to attest to His greatness and truth, no creature is capable of knowing and understanding their meaning... And if we are created in the form and mold [of God], do not imagine that our eyes or hands are in the form of a real [Godly] hand, rather these are most hidden truths regarding the essence of God, the source of

35 The parable related by Rav Cordovero of multi-colored glasses bears a resemblance to the parable used by Rambam in his Moreh Nevuchim (1:53) of how different materials react differently to exposure to the Sun. Just as this difference does not lead us to suggest any change in the Sun, just in the external matter with which it interacts, so too our disparate experiences of God should not lead us to imagine any change or disunity in Him.

36 Rav Gikatilla’s thirteenth century work has been warmly embraced by all streams of Kabbalistic tradition (including both the Vilna Gaon and the Chassidim) and is heavily drawn upon in Rabbeinu Bachye ben Asher’s commentary to the Torah. Indeed Shapiro himself cites Rav Gikatilla’s Sha’arei Orah on p. 128 as a work of “the great kabbalist.” Rav Gikatilla’s comments are particularly important as he belongs to the school of Kabbalists whom Shapiro accuses of endorsing prayer “to” the Sefirot (see early in the second Sha’ar).
bounty which flows to all existence according to the wish of God...[emphasis mine] as it says (Yeshayah 40:25), “And to whom can you compare Me and can I be equated?” Know and understand that there is no similarity between us and Him from the point of view of matter and form, rather the intention [of statements regarding] the forms of limbs...are hidden and elevated matters which our intellect cannot comprehend... Just as there is no basis for comparison between us [and God] regarding physical limbs, so too there is no comparison regarding character traits... Be extremely careful and guard your soul from stumbling and saying that God possesses a limiting character trait, for this is not so.”

Or as the influential Kabbalistic thinker Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto puts it:

“The foundation of this Wisdom [Kabbalah] is the unity of the Emanator...who possesses no change, no plurality, and no bodily features... The whole matter of Kabbalistic wisdom is only an explanation of the attributes of His judgment, His Providential decrees...”

“This is the entire matter of the Sefirot...His attributes...how they relate and depend on one another.”

The above passages, whose explanations are grounded in the Zohar itself, provide a context which illuminates many of the apparently corporeal Kabbalistic statements cited by Marc Shapiro. The great

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37 Ma’amor Havikuach 1:30–32. Ramchal further explains in Klach Pitchei Chochmah (5:1) that “Divinity we cannot call anything but radiant light...though it is obvious that no term nor word can be used to describe Divinity... And understand that despite this, it is not actual light like the radiance of physical light.” Notably, Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim 1:5) writes that even one who understands that the Divine Presence consists of some form of “created light” is not to be considered a heretic.

38 Ibid 1:62.

39 Zohar II 176a:4: “All of these things [Sefirot] are only called so from our perspective...but above, there is only a single measure. He does not change and is not changed, as it is written: ‘I Hashem have not changed’ (Malachi 3:6).”
distinction of humanity from the Kabbalistic perspective is that the human body reflects the Divine Sefirotic system through which God relates to the world. This concept, a central theme in Kabbalistic thought, holds the key to understanding Shapiro’s “revealing” corporeal quotes which describe humans as bearing a Divine image or corresponding body parts, and is sorely missing from his analysis of the subject. As a leading academic in the area of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem, put it,

*The limbs of the human body...are nothing but images of a certain spiritual mode of existence...the Divine Being Himself cannot be expressed. All that can be expressed are His symbols.*

Shapiro’s failure to engage the profound meaning concealed within the Kabbalistic codes creates a superficial and at times misleading impression, rather than a genuine representation of Jewish mystical beliefs.

By including such brief explanations of mystical terminology and concepts, Shapiro could have afforded his readers a fair opportunity to assess the credibility of his claims regarding the corporeal implications of Kabbalah. Since he does not, we are entitled to question the value of his attempt to pass severe theological judgment against a scholastic system, the basic linguistic and conceptual structure of which he is unable or unwilling to describe and explain.

**Rashi a Corporealist? No Body of Proof**

Having cited the firm opinions of leading historians of Jewish thought Harry Wolfson, J. L. Teicher, and Joseph Dan, that medi-

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41 Gershom Scholem writes (*Jewish Mysticism* ad loc.): “The world of the Sefiroth is the hidden world of language, the world of the divine names.”

42 These opinions are cited on p. 59 of Marc Shapiro’s book.

eval Rabbinic scholars did not hold corporealist beliefs, Shapiro then singles out two such scholars, Rashi and the Tosafist Rabbi Moshe Taku, for individual treatment of their apparently corporealistic conceptions of God.\footnote{44}

Rashi’s terse and concise style, allied with the fact that his comments primarily seek to explain the text in question rather than broadcast his personal opinions, pose a great challenge to those attempting to prove definitively his philosophical position solely on the basis of his writings.\footnote{45} Such difficulties are compounded by the fact that much of his commentary on the Torah takes the form of alluding to or paraphrasing (arguably mystical) esoteric Aggadic sources, the nature of which we have discussed at length above. While these features of Rashi’s style alone should make one wary of hasty assessments of his philosophical beliefs on the basis of isolated and unexamined citations, the way in which Shapiro presents some of his sources\footnote{46} is once again open to challenge.

One particularly striking example involves Rashi’s commentary to Shemot on the verse, “I will put my hand against Egypt.”\footnote{47} Here Rashi explains “yad mamash—His actual hand—is used to smite them.” Shapiro cites this as an example of Rashi attributing a real, physical

\footnote{44} Shapiro bemoans the fact that “we do not have much in the way of written records” of the “number of scholars in medieval times who were corporealists.”\footnote{45} Particularly those who attempt to construct such proofs from his literal rendering of or silence in the face of anthropomorphic text. For a detailed debate on the matter, see Rabbi Natan Slifkin, “Was Rashi a Corporealist?” (2009) 7 Hakirah, the Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought, pp. 81–105, and, in response, Rav Saul Zucker, “No, Rashi Was Not a Corporealist” (2009) 9 Hakirah, the Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought, pp. 15–43 (these being the first two articles in a long-running debate).\footnote{46} P. 57.\footnote{47} Shemot 7:4.
hand to God. Almost concealed in a brief footnote, however, is an oblique reference to Rashi’s own figurative explanation of the term “yad mamash”:

Many terminologies can be represented by the term “yad” and they are all “yad mamash”; the interpreter should adjust the terminology to suit the context.

It is difficult to imagine that anyone attempting to present a balanced investigation into Rashi’s true beliefs would have consigned such a key source—Rashi’s own explanation of the term “yad mamash” as being figurative—to a brief footnote reference. Furthermore, just a few chapters away, Rashi uses the term “yad mamash” in an unambiguously figurative manner when describing proximity to a river. Neither this comment of Rashi, nor his oft-repeated explanation that all mentions of “yad Hashem” in prophetic works are a metaphorical expression of God’s power are deemed to be worthy of even a footnote reference.

A further key source in determining Rashi’s philosophical belief regarding corporealism is granted only a fleeting footnote mention by Marc Shapiro. The Machzor Vitri, written by a close student of Rashi, states in sharp terms:

Since the Tzur [God] has no form or image, anyone who says this [implies that He does], we suspect that he is a heretic.

Shapiro’s brief footnote acknowledgement of this crucial piece of evidence does not consider the implications of Rashi’s close student (who quotes him with reverence throughout his book) stating, according to

48 P. 57, footnote 67, which reads “see also Rashi on Shemot 14:31.”
49 In this verse, Rashi explains “yad” to refer to God’s power. See further Rashi’s comments to Shemot 15:8, 20:11, and 31:17, which demonstrate his belief that the Torah makes use of allegorical terms when describing God in order to aid human understanding.
50 Shemot 2:5. Pharaoh’s daughter went to bathe “al yad haye’or,” near the river. Rashi explains “yad mamash” means right next to the river, just as a person’s hand is close to them.
51 Yechezkel 1:3, 37:1, and 40:1; see also Melachim I 18:46.
52 Usually identified as a Rabbeinu Simchah. Shapiro writes (p. 57, footnote 68): “from Rashi’s school.”
53 §426.
Shapiro’s claim, that his teacher, a pillar of Jewish tradition, is in fact a heretic. It does not appear that Shapiro considers this to have compromised the integrity of his allegation against Rashi.

The Jewish philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz notes that while Rashi’s commentary is commonly dismissed as representing “naive faith,” those who read his writings with a trained eye will notice a sophisticated philosophical comprehension of God. In one instance, Rashi contrasts the superior prophecy of Moshe to that of other prophets, saying:

All the prophets looked through a dark glass and thought they saw, and our teacher Moshe looked through a clear glass and knew that he had not seen Him to His Face.

Rashi clearly understands that God’s essence is beyond comprehension, and that Moshe, who experienced an enhanced level of prophecy, perceived this more acutely than other prophets. Furthermore, in a low-key remark at the end of parashat Naso, Rashi comments that the word “midaber,” which is used to describe God “speaking” to Moshe, really means God “speaking to Himself”; Moshe did not hear a voice but rather gained an inner awareness of God’s meaning. This pivotal comment is described by Leibowitz as “astounding.” He adds:

Rashi lived two generations before Maimonides, but in these few words Rashi gives Maimonides’ entire view on prophecy...

Leibowitz then continues, for the benefit of anyone who may have missed his point:

We are not surprised at Maimonides, for this view of prophecy is in keeping with his entire system of faith. But Rashi, who is always considered to be of naive faith and far from philosophic thought and analysis, says the exact same thing.

55 Commentary to Yevamot 49b, discussed by Leibowitz (op. cit.), p. 136.
56 See Chapter 16.
57 See also the Commentary of Rav Ovadiah Seforo. Rashi makes a very similar comment on the same word in Yechezkel 2:2.
Finally, we are left to consider the position of Rabbi Moshe Taku, whom Marc Shapiro labels the “most significant” example of Rabbinic corporealism.\textsuperscript{58} Let us examine this prime exhibit of Shapiro’s thesis. Surely at least here we can expect to be confronted with an unambiguous example of Rabbinic belief in Divine corporeality? 

An initial examination of what is believed to be Rav Taku’s \textit{Ketav Tamim}\textsuperscript{59} appears to uphold this suggestion, revealing that Rav Taku rigorously defended a literal reading of anthropomorphic Aggadot, sharply criticizing those who sought to interpret them allegorically. Yet Shapiro also concedes a significant caveat—correctly recognizing that there is much debate as to the extent of Rav Taku’s anthropomorphism. In fact, by the end of the passage, the careful reader is aware that, rather than the standard corporealist belief that God possesses a physical body or form, Rav Taku’s dispute with Rambam is a subtle and nuanced debate as to how to reconcile two apparently conflicting principles: God’s omnipotence and His incorporeality. In short, does He have the power to present Himself in physical form?

Most crucially, however, Shapiro omits reference to the indispensable analysis of a leading academic scholar of medieval Jewish mysticism, Joseph Dan,\textsuperscript{60} who edited and wrote the introduction to the only edition

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\item \textsuperscript{58} P. 55.
\item \textsuperscript{59} In a recent article (published in \textit{Dialogue for Jewish Issues and Ideas} #5, Feldheim, 2014), Rabbi Aharon Lopiansky presented a number of challenges to the authenticity of the sections of \textit{Ketav Tamim} which are claimed to belong to this 800-year-old work. These surviving sections are based on an unidentified manuscript discovered in a French library a couple of centuries ago by Eliakim Carmoly, a library worker. Carmoly, who had been removed from his Rabbinic position by the Brussels Rabbinate for “Reformist tendencies,” had an acknowledged track record of manipulating and even forging Hebrew manuscripts. Furthermore, it is striking that none of the manuscript’s controversial references to anthropomorphism or insults of respected figures such as Rav Sa’adiah Gaon, Rambam, and Rav Yehudah HaChassid appear to have been addressed or even mentioned in any contemporary or even later work. (Professor Joseph Dan, in his introduction to his version of \textit{Ketav Tamim}, finds this “defeaning silence” deeply troubling.) While these considerations permit us a degree of suspicion regarding the \textit{Ketav’s} authenticity, this chapter has followed Shapiro (who does not reference any of these concerns) in presuming its reliability.
\item \textsuperscript{60} This omission is particularly remiss since Shapiro quotes passages from Dan’s works on
\end{itemize}
of Rav Taku’s works to be published in the past 150 years. After quoting Rav Taku and the apparent meaning of his words, Dan proceeds to argue that:

He [Rav Taku] insists on the literal acceptance of the prophets’ descriptions of their visions as well as the anthropomorphic references to God in talmudic-midrashic literature. He does not do so because of his belief in the literal veracity of these descriptions; he only insists that they represent the maximum that can be conveyed concerning God’s essence and appearance, and that any further inquiry cannot lead to valid conclusions. God chose to reveal to us in the scriptures whatever is found in them: man should be satisfied with that, and ask no more questions. It is not that Rabbi Moses Taku believed in an anthropomorphic God; most probably, he did not.61

Viewing Rav Taku from Dan’s perspective, what we see is a manifestation of Ra’avad’s opinion (examined at length at the end of our previous chapter) that theological matters whose resolution lie beyond the scope of the human intellect should not be analyzed. Rav Taku takes this argument further and argues that, by attempting to conceive of God through the prism of the human intellect, one is necessary limiting the infinite. As he puts it:

The Almighty is not confined in space or time, but He is also not confined to our limited idea of what He consists of...62

This assertion of our inability to fathom Divinity requires that we accept prophecies at face value and make no allegorical attempt to pierce the textual veil. God wants us to relate to Him through anthropomorphism,63 even though we are aware that, while it might

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61 Ashkenazi Hasidism and the Maimonidean Controversy (op. cit.) p. 42.
62 Or as Shapiro quotes more briefly on p. 39: “They are issuing a decree to the Creator as to how He must be. By doing so they are degrading themselves.”
63 See also the comments of Rav Hirsch at the end of Chapter 7.
convey His message to us, it cannot meaningfully convey His nature or essence.

While this explanation may effectively rebut the allegation of belief in actual corporeality, Rav Taku’s strong opinions concerning the literal rendering of anthropomorphic Aggadot still come uncomfortably close to (and perhaps even coincide with) the *rabim vetovim* of Ra’avad, who were “corrupted by the Aggadot” into some sort of acceptance of Divine corporeality. This being the case, it is important for us to know how mainstream and influential these radical opinions, expressed in *Ketav Tamim*, were on Jewish traditional thought. The answer, according to Joseph Dan, is clear:

*Judging by the number of references to it and quotations from it in later generations, it hardly had any impact. It seems to represent an isolated, inconsequential episode in the history of Jewish thought in the Middle Ages.*

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64 Examined at length at the end of the previous chapter.

65 The radical nature of Rav Taku’s theological views is shown further in his condemnation as heresy of the writings of authorities such as Rav Sa’adiah Gaon, Rambam, Ibn Ezra, as well as mystics such as Rav Yehudah HaChassid.