

## Rav Moshe Taku: non-Rationalist Judaism

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### God has no Physical Body

One of the most basic and fundamental beliefs of Judaism is that there is one God, and that He has no physical form. The Chazon Ish, for example, says that even a pagan who worships idols, but believes that the physical idol is only a representation of a spiritual force, is not considered an idolater, but rather a heretic.<sup>1</sup> In other words, it is the belief in a corporeal god which distinguishes idolatry from error. Certainly we cannot imagine Judaism espousing belief in any kind of physical god.

Rambam writes in *Hilchot Teshuva* (3:7), “Five categories of people are called heretics. . . . Someone who says that there is One God but that He is physical and has form.”

Yet we also recognize that there are many statements in the Rabbinical writings, and many verses in scripture that imply, or state explicitly that God has a physical body. Even the most well known phrase “God spoke to Moshe, saying. . .” implies that God has some form of mouth, and that He moves and changes with time – all of which imply physical attributes.

Therefore Raavad in his glosses attacks Rambam’s claim that a person

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<sup>1</sup> *Chazon Ish al ha-Rambam Hilchot Teshuva* 3:7

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who believes the literal meaning of the text should be considered a heretic. He writes, “Why does he call this person a heretic? Many greater and better people than he followed this line of thought, based on what they saw in the Biblical verses, and even more so in what they saw in the words of aggada which confuse the intellect (*de’ot*).” Nevertheless, it seems clear that Raavad does not consider belief in a physical God the correct, normative belief.

Though it seems hard for us to understand, the issue of whether or not God had a physical form was a much debated controversial issue in the Middle Ages. Ramban writes in a letter to the Jews of Northern France<sup>2</sup>:

Our French Rabbis – we are their students and we drink from their waters - ... in all the land of France, its Rabbis and ministers, agreed to excommunicate someone who reads the *Guide for the Perplexed* and *Sefer Ha-Mada*.... He [Rambam] was like someone forced and with no choice to build the book as a refuge from the Greek philosophers, to get away from Aristotle and Galen... It is permitted for those close to the rulers to learn Greek wisdom, to understand the skills of the doctors, to take each measure, to know the forms, and the other forms of knowledge... when we lost the books of our sages, when we lost our land, and they were forced to learn them from the books of the Greeks or other nations, the hearts strayed after heresy... I also heard that you objected to *Sefer Ha-Mada* because he says that there is no form or shape [to the One] Above.<sup>3</sup>

In the words of Encyclopedia Judaica:

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<sup>2</sup> All translations are by the author, unless otherwise stated

<sup>3</sup> *Igeret Ha-Ramban 2* in *Kitvei Ramban* Chavell edition (1963) vol. 1 p. 338 Ramban belonged to a tradition of kabbalists who had an entirely different approach to the nature of God and his interaction with the world. Unfortunately an investigation of this approach is outside the scope of this essay.

The violence of Maimonides' polemic against anthropomorphic beliefs and doctrines suggests that these were fairly widespread and that a great many people were affected by the aggadot. The influence of Maimonides, however, was both powerful and lasting. Even against the vehement opposition of more conservative thinkers of his day, his Guide determined what was to become the Orthodox concept of God within Judaism for a long time. There is evidence (Jedaiah ha-Penini of the 13th century, Moses Alashkar of the 15th) to show that it was the writings of Maimonides which finally did away with all anthropomorphic notions among Jews.<sup>4</sup>

Rambam himself in his *Igeret Techiat ha-Meitim*<sup>5</sup> writes that he “met a man who was considered a wise man amongst the Jews, and he certainly knew the ways of give-and-take in the learning of Torah... Yet he was uncertain whether God is physical, having an eye, a hand, a foot or intestines as it states in the verses or whether He is not physical. Others that I met in certain lands held with certainty that He has a physical body, and considered someone who believed the opposite as a heretic.... They understood many of the derashot literally. And I heard this also about some that I haven't seen.”<sup>6</sup>

Rambam also writes in his letter to Pisa (p. 40a), “Guard your soul well from the words of the majority of the French authors from Provence... who make God impure through their language, when they mention the Creator, blessed is He, constantly in all their books, using terminology which gives physical form to the Creator, blessed is He, how great and terrible are the words of the deniers, who to them.”<sup>7</sup>

While it is true that many verses in the Torah imply that God has a body, the contemporary understanding is that such expressions are

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4 vol. 3 p. 55

5 p. 8a in *Igrot Ha-Rambam*

6 cited in *Torah Shleima* Yitro p. 297

7 cited in *Torah Shleima* ibid.

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metaphors for God's actions or creations. Targum Onkelos always explains the meaning as referring to one of God's attributes or some other non-physical concept. As Rambam writes in *Moreh Nevuchim* 1:27:

Onkelos the convert was an expert in Hebrew and Aramaic. He set as his goal the removal of [any belief in] physicality [of God]. For this reason he explained any description described by the Torah which may lead to [a belief in] physicality [metaphorically] based on the context. Thus, for example, when he translates words indicating motion he explains them as referring to the revelation of a created light [rather than as referring to God Himself].<sup>8</sup>

Another early Jewish source who explicitly denies any physical form to God is the Jewish-Greek philosopher Philo. In the words of Harry Austryn Wolfson in his book *Philo*:

One general rule laid down by Philo is that no anthropomorphic expression about God is to be taken literally. As proof text for this general rule he quotes the verse "God is not as man" (Bamidbar 23:19) which is taken by him to contain the general principle that God is not to be likened to anything perceptible by the senses.<sup>9</sup>

He also writes that, "The principle of the unity of God furthermore means to him the simplicity of God, which, as we shall see, is understood by him to imply not only the incorporeality of God but also the unknowability and indescribability..."<sup>10</sup>

However, Onkelos (and Philo) were in the minority in their explicit claim that God has no physical form. According to Meir Bar-Ilan "the only book attributed to rabbis of the Talmud period (circa 1-6

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<sup>8</sup> See, however, Ramban's commentary on Bereishis 46:1 where he cites this statement of Rambam and challenges his position. However, ultimately he too agrees that the descriptions of God as having physical attributes are not literal.

<sup>9</sup> p. 116

<sup>10</sup> p.172

centuries), where God has no body is the Aramaic translation attributed to Onkelos. As is quite known there are many cases in that Targum (and in others as well), where the translator refrained from a literal translation, especially when the Hebrew text speaks of an anthropomorphic God.”<sup>11</sup> The next historical text that states that God has no body is Rav Saadiah Gaon in his *Emunot ve-De'ot*. His is the earliest ‘mainstream’ book of Jewish philosophy, and in it he states clearly that God does not have any physical body. He writes:

When I came to deal with the subject of the Creator, I found that people rejected this whole inquiry... others again go so far as to picture Him as a body; others, while not explicitly describing him as a body, assign to Him quantity or quality or space or time, or similar things, and by looking for these qualities they do in fact assign to Him a body, since these attributes belong only to a body. the purpose of my introductory remarks is to remove their false ideas, to take a load from their minds, and to point out that the extreme subtleness which we have assigned to the nature of the Creator is, so to speak, its own warrant, and the fact that in our reasoning we find the notion of God to be more abstract than other knowledge shows that reasoning to be correct.... As to those who wish us to imagine God as a body, they should wake up from their illusions. Is not the conception of the body the first stage arrived at in our pursuit of knowledge?<sup>12</sup>

There are those who agree that God has no physical body, but reject Rambam’s claim that such an opinion is a heretical one. For example, the author of *Ohr Zaruah* in his commentary to Sanhedrin 90a argues like the Raavad, that a person should not be considered a heretic for

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11 ‘The Hand of God A chapter in Rabbinic Anthropomorphism’ Meir Bar-Ilan <http://faculty.biu.ac.il/~barilm/handofgd.html>

12 Rav Saadiah Gaon *Book of Doctrines and Beliefs* translated Alexander Altmann in *Three Jewish Philosophers* Atheneum, New York 1969. p. 78

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their innocent false beliefs. But he also states explicitly that God cannot have a body:

Rabbeinu Moshe [ben Maimon] wrote in chapter 3 of *Hilchot Teshuva* that five [categories of] people are called heretics. His words are outside the opinion of the Talmud. Even though logic dictates, and the simple reading of the Tanach, that God has no physical body or form, as the verse states, “To whom can you compare God, and what image can you describe for him?” (Yishaya 40:18)... And this is also known by all wise people. But someone who errs and doesn’t descend to the depths of the matter, and understands the verses literally, and holds that God has an image is not called a heretic. If that were true why did the Torah not publicize this fact [that God has no body], and why did the Sages of the Talmud not make it known explicitly?... Rather it must be the case that they were not stringent about this. Rather a person should believe in God’s unity according to his intellect... As Moshe Rabbeinu said, “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” Hearing in this context means accepting based on received tradition... And the Sages of the Mishna and the Talmud did not involve themselves with this, but accepted it as a tradition and with faith. They didn’t teach to investigate the matter... There were many of the holy Sages of the Talmud, from whom comes the Torah, who didn’t set their hearts to contemplate the nature of God, but simply accepted the verses according to their simple meaning, and based on this naiveté they thought that God has a body and an image. Heaven forbid that we should call such people heretics.<sup>13</sup>

While it is possible to understand why a person who believes in the

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<sup>13</sup> *Sanbedrei Gedolah le-Masechet Sanbedrin* (Jerusalem, 1972), volume 5, section 2, p. 116-118

literal meaning of the verses is not considered a heretic (as the Raavad and Ohr Zaruah state), it is difficult for us to imagine an alternative to Rambam's basic position that God has no body. How can someone logically believe that God has a body? Doesn't that limit Him and His influence on the physical world? At best it seems a very simplistic philosophical position to take, lacking the sophistication which Rambam ascribes to monotheism. If so, how can Raavad describe people who hold that God has a body as being even greater than Rambam?

### ***Ktav Tamim***

The only medieval Jewish work extant today which directly attacks Rambam for his view that God has no body is *Ktav Tamim* written by Rabbi Moshe ben Chasdai Taku. This work was written primarily to challenge Rav Saadiah Gaon's views on God's physicality. He also attacks Rambam's comments in *Sefer Ha-Mada* for the same reason (it appears that Moshe Taku did not ever see the *Guide for the Perplexed*. If he had, presumably, he would have attacked that too<sup>14</sup>).

We don't have very much biographical or historical information about him, but Urbach writes that:

Rabbi Avraham bar Utile quotes sections from *Ktav Tamim* in his book *Arugat Ha-Bosem*, and refers to Rav Moshe Taku as being no longer alive. That book was written in (or near to) 1234, and it seems likely that Rav Moshe Taku died only shortly before that time.<sup>15</sup>

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14 Kirchheim and Blumenfeld, introduction to *Ktav Tamim*

15 E. E. Urbach *Baalei HaTosafot; Tolodotam, Chibureihem, Shitatam* (1954) p. 425

R. Kirchheim and I. Blumenfeld in their introduction to the edition of *Ktav Tamim* (in *Otzar Nechmad* 3 (1860) 54-99) write that E. E. Urbach in *Tarbitz*, 10 (1938/39), 47-50

Demonstrates that the author of *Ktav Tamim* lived in the middle of the 13th century. Even though according to some authors (e.g. Tikuchinsky 1910 p. 70) was not the same as Rav Moshe ben Chasdai who

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Even though today he is not well known, Moshe Taku was well known by his contemporaries. He was considered one of the *Baalei Tosafot*, and is mentioned by several of the medieval authorities. For example Ramban writes, “The great sage, Rabbi Moshe ben Chasdai of Polgia – he should live a long and healthy life”.<sup>16</sup> The Ohr Zaruah<sup>17</sup> mentions him, as does the Rema<sup>18</sup>.

R. Kirchhiem and I. Blumenfeld explain that, “The writings of Rav Moshe Taku were well known and cited widely by his contemporaries, but were lost to later generations, and almost completely forgotten. The book *Ktav Tamim* was lost and forgotten about until it was rediscovered in Ms. Paris H711. The beginning and end are missing, and the name of the book and the name of the author are missing. However the same criticism of *Shir haYichud* which is cited by *Shut Harama* 123 in his name appears in it.”<sup>19</sup>

We no longer have the entirety of this book *Ktav Tamim* - only a couple of sections survive<sup>20</sup>. We don't know what the intended nature of the work as a whole was, but the remaining section that we have is primarily a polemic. The author renounces any kind of inquiry into ‘what is above’, whether philosophical or mystical, like those works of Rav Yehuda HaChasid and the like. He is against “those who want

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lived slightly earlier (in the generation of the Ohr Zaruah and R' Simcha Shapira – he must have died in the first half of the 13th century), Urbach proves from a manuscript of Arugat HaBosem found in Rome, where he states explicitly “HaRav Moshe bar Chasdai wrote in *Ktav Tamim*”. He was almost a contemporary, and thus must be considered a reliable source.

16 Ramban's Commentary on *Gittin* 7b

17 *Ohr Zarua haKatan* 13; 125

18 *Torat HaOlah* (p. 147)

19 R. Kirchhiem and I. Blumenfeld in their introduction to the edition of *Ktav Tamim* (in *Otzar Nechmad* 3 (1860) 54-99)

20 “Only one fragment of *Ktav Tamim* has survived, the end of the second part of the work and the beginning of the third. Quotations from the book are also found in Ashkenazi literature of the 13th century.” *Encyclopedia Judaica* vol. 15 p. 737

to be wise from within themselves and try to put their words into ‘*maaseh Bereishit*.’” This seems to be referring to the manuscripts of Rabbi Elazar of Worms.<sup>21</sup>

At first glance it seems clear that Rav Moshe Taku believes that God has a physical body. Furthermore, he holds that denying that God has a body is a heretical view, since there are many explicit verses and statements of the Talmudic Rabbis that say that God has a body. Kirchhiem and Blumenfeld describe him as being “from the group of *magshimim*, [those who attribute physicality to God] and thus attacked Rambam for denying God’s physicality. Because he was only a master of halacha, and not a deep rationalist, all of his proofs of God’s physicality are taken from aggadot and the stranger statements in the Talmud and midrashim”<sup>22</sup>

Because God is infinite, He can do whatever He wants. To deny the possibility that God can appear in physical form is to limit God’s omnipotence. Because God is unknowable, we can never understand why God does such things. However, according to Rabbi Taku, the words of the Torah and the Rabbis must be understood literally, and to deny that God can have physical form, or to interpret every mention of physicality as allegorical, is to pervert and deny the Torah.

Rav Moshe Taku begins his attack on both Rav Saadiah and Rambam by claiming that they veer from the literal truth of the verses of scripture. They do so in order to avoid any allusion to God having physical form. Rav Taku cites their opinion and attacks it:

He [Rav Saadiah] writes in his book (section 2): Everything is a metaphor, for the Creator has no physicality. He has no speech, no walking or movement. He feels no pain, nor happiness... He writes that when the [Tanach] says, “The hat

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21 E. E. Urbach *Baalei HaTosafot; Tolodotam, Chibureihem, Shitatam* p. 423

22 p. 55

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of salvation is on His head”, “the eyes of the Eternal, your God”, “You cried in the ears of the Eternal”, “The mouth of God”, “God will shine His face”, “The hand of God”, “God said to His heart”, “Bow to His footstool”, these are all metaphorical expressions, similar to when it says “the heavens speak of the Glory of God”...<sup>23</sup>

He continues his attack on Rav Saadiah

He [Rav Saadiah] writes (*maamar* 2), “A verse does not lose its simple meaning unless the simple meaning contradicts something that is testified to by the intellect, such as “For the Lord, your God, is a devouring fire” which cannot be understood in its simple meaning, since [fire is] physical, and the evidence of the wise men testifies that God does not have a [physical] body.” This contradicts explicit verses and the commentaries of our Rabbis...<sup>24</sup>

Then he launches into an attack on Rambam:

The books of Rabbi Moshe bar Maimon follow in a similar way... “Since God is not physical or corporeal it is clear that none of the physical things could happen to him, not combination nor separation, not talking, nor speech like a human speaks. All the things that are written in the Torah and the prophets are all analogies and metaphors.” (*Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:5).<sup>25</sup>

Rav Moshe Taku tells us what the correct Jewish belief should be – that since God is omnipotent He can choose to appear to His creations in physical form when necessary:

Now we will return to the opinion of the Torah and the opinion of our Rabbis, and we will establish the honor of the

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23 p. 64

24 p. 72

25 p. 65-66

Creator, blessed is His Name, in the mouth of all creations in His holiness and His greatness and we will remove the stumbling block from our minds. For the Living God – His greatness cannot be measured, nor His powers. We cannot compare Him to any image, and we, who are fetid drops, cannot think about His nature. When it is His will to show Himself to the angels, He shows Himself standing straight, as much as they are able to accept. Sometimes He shows them a strange light without any form, and they know that the Divine Presence is there. He has movement, which can be derived from the fact that His fetid creations have movement. He created the air which provides life to the creations and created the place of the world. If this world would not continually have new air, any creature that entered into it would not be able to live. When He created the air He brought it to life from the dead state that it was in before. He is the Living God, and His Will is for life, and He created within the air a world that can give birth to creations according to what He decreed for each species. He created the upper worlds with strange creatures so that they can recognize a part of His greatness, and He created man in the lower worlds, who is also similar to the upper creatures, and gave him Torah in order that he be able to recognize through the Torah the greatness of the Creator. He furthermore made known to them the acts of the chariot and the acts of creation. But without the wisdom of the Torah, it is impossible for any person to recognize the greatness of the Holy One, blessed is He, through intellect.<sup>26</sup>

He continues by claiming that any mention of God as physical in scripture or rabbinic sources is to be understood as referring to God Himself, and not to any created ‘form’. He rejects the approaches of those commentaries who explain these references to physicality as

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<sup>26</sup> *Ktav Tamim* p. 79-80

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being descriptions of some intermediary force which is created by God.

A wise person will understand that according to the reasoning and intellect of those 'outside' viewpoints that we mentioned above, one must deny the statement of the Rabbis (*Bereishit Rabba* 88) that: "I will be faithful for them' - for three thousand years before the creation of the world God created the Torah and was looking in it and learning it." According to their words that there is no movement or motion and no speech all the words of the Torah and of our Rabbis must be analogies and metaphors. Heaven forbid that anyone with a soul within his body should believe in what they say, to lessen the honor of our Creator, and to deny the greatness of what our Rabbis have told us! They have also written, "Does He sit on an exalted and high throne? Originally was it possible for Him without a throne and now He need a throne? Furthermore anyone who sits on a throne has the throne surrounding him, and we can't say such a thing about the Creator, about Whom it says that He fills the heavens and the earth." These are [their] words of blasphemy, that He doesn't need the throne! They have forgotten... what the Men of the Great Assembly established in our prayers, "To God who sits ... on the seventh day He ascended and sat on His throne of glory..." We see that He created the world and sat on the throne of glory, and not that He created other forms and sat them on the throne. Such a form was never created and these are words of blasphemy.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore he writes, "we have been able to escape from the reasoning of those who say that God created forms through which to speak with His creations. That tradition (reasoning that the voice with which God speaks to prophets is itself a creation) remains with

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27 p. 85

the Karaites and heretics.”<sup>28</sup>

## The Real Basis for Disagreement

If we delve a bit deeper we find that Rav Moshe Taku’s primary objection to Rav Saadiah Gaon’s *Emunot ve-Deot* is not about whether or not God has a body, but is rather directed against his reliance on secular wisdom and his rationalist approach. He writes:

My complaint against *Sefer Emunot* is that he comes using *chochma chitzonit* (external wisdom – philosophy) and increases sins by leading the people from complete fear of God and [causing them to] think about things, until they no longer know [the foundations] upon which they are standing. He strengthens the hands of those astrologers who have impure thoughts in their hearts against the Talmud of our Rabbis, which is a complete Torah, and he strengthens their idle chatter.<sup>29</sup>

An apparent rabbinic basis for the anti-rationalist approach of Rav Moshe Taku is the mishna in *Chagiga*, which expressly limits the possible and/or permitted areas of logical thought:

Anyone who looks into four areas [of rational thought] – it would be better that he had never come into the world; what is above, what is below, what came before and what came after. And anyone who does not have concern for the honor of his Creator – it would be better if he had never come into the world.<sup>30</sup>

The *Tosefta* is even more explicit regarding this prohibition:

From the day that God created Adam on the earth you [are permitted to] expound, but you are not [permitted to]

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28 p. 80

29 p. 64

30 *Chagiga* 11b

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expound upon what is above, what is below, what has been and what will be.<sup>31</sup>

From these sources it would appear that claims about the nature of God, or the nature of the world beyond the physical, or the interaction between God and the world, are forbidden. Furthermore to try to understand God using limited human reason shows lack of concern for the honor of the creator – it would be better for a person who does so never to have been born.

In other words, Rav Moshe Taku doesn't have to present a rational explanation of how God can take on physical form yet still be a complete unity. The fact that it cannot be explained rationally is irrelevant, since according to him the only source of knowledge about God and the world is the Torah, whether written or oral.

Rav Moshe Taku speaks this out explicitly:

Our Rabbis did not try to explain the nature of [the heavenly bodies], because they didn't want to lie about the actions of God, things that they don't know... Not like Rav Moshe ben Maimon and Ibn Ezra who say that there are ten heavens... their words are despicable... Someone who believes in [the Torah] will deny this [statements of the philosophers]... We should not think what God was like before there was a world, and the nature of God cannot be known by even an angel or a seraph, and His place is unknowable... but we know that He is the Master of everything, and His Divine Presence is in the heights of Heaven... Our Rabbis did not try to explain the nature of [the heavenly bodies], because they didn't want to lie about the actions of God, things that they don't know... Not like Rav Moshe ben Maimon and Ibn Ezra who say that there are ten heavens... their words are despicable... Someone who believes in [the Torah] will deny this [statements of the

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<sup>31</sup> *Tosefta Chagiga* 2:4

philosophers].<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, Rav Moshe Taku accuses Rav Saadiah of straying from normative, traditional Judaism. He says that any understanding of scripture that is non-literal is outside the bounds of Jewish belief:

Until the time of Rav Saadiah nobody would make a new meaning in the simple meaning of the Torah, the Prophets, the Ketuvim or the words of our Rabbis which are trustworthy and remain standing forever<sup>33</sup>

Rav Saadiah and Rambam, on the other hand, claim that the primary source of knowledge is human reason. They have as a basis for their position from the statement in the Talmud, “Why do I need a verse? We can derive it from reason” (*lama li kera? sevava hee!*)<sup>34</sup> Where there is an apparent conflict between reason and Torah they explain the Torah metaphorically or allegorically in order to maintain the primacy of reason.

For example, Rav Saadiah writes:

We affirm then that there exist three sources of knowledge: (1) the knowledge given by sense perception; (2) the knowledge given by reason; (3) inferential knowledge... We have found many people who reject these three Roots of Knowledge... But we, the Congregation of the Believers in the Unity of God, accept the truth of all the three sources of knowledge, and we add a fourth source, which we derive from the three preceding ones, and which has become a Root of Knowledge for us, namely, the truth of reliable Tradition.

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32 p. 82-84

33 p. 68

34 *Bava Kamma* 46b, *Ketuvot* 22a. While this principle doesn't necessarily force the acceptance of the primacy of logic, it strongly implies it. Notwithstanding this, even those who do not agree with Rambam (e.g. Tosafot – see below) accept this as a localized principle for derivation of halacha (see for example Tosafot on *Kiddushin* 31a).

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For it is based on the knowledge of sense perception and the knowledge of Reason, as we shall explain.<sup>35</sup>... As to the knowledge of Reason, we hold that every conception formed in our mind (Reason) which is free from defects is undoubtedly true knowledge, provided we know how to reason, complete the act of reasoning and guard against illusions and dreams.<sup>36</sup>

He explicitly rejects the approach of Rav Moshe Taku (or those who espoused such views at the time of Rav Saadiah), calling it an ignorant approach.

It may be objected: ‘How can we undertake to pursue knowledge by means of speculation and inquiry with the object of attaining mathematical certainty seeing that our people reject this manner of speculation as leading to unbelief and the adoption of heretical views?’ Our answer is that only the ignorant speak thus... Another objection is that the greatest of the Sages of Israel prohibited this, and particularly the speculation on the origin of Time and Space, when they declared, ‘Anyone who looks into four areas [of rational thought] – it would be better that he had never come into the world; what is above, what is below, what came before and what came after.’ Our answer is this: it cannot be thought that the Sages should have wished to prohibit us from rational inquiry seeing that our Creator has commanded us to engage in such inquiry in addition to accepting the reliable Tradition. Thus He said, “Know you not? Hear you not? Hath it not been told you from the beginning? Have ye not understood the foundation of the earth?” (Yishaya 40:21).... The reader of this book should know that we inquire and speculate in matters of our religion for two

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35 Rav Saadiah Gaon *Book of Doctrines and Beliefs* translated Alexander Altmann in *Three Jewish Philosophers* Atheneum, New York 1969. p. 36

36 p. 37

reasons: (1) in order that we may find out for ourselves what we know in the way of imparted knowledge from the Prophets of God; (2) in order that we may be able to refute those who attack us on matters connected with our religion. For our Lord (be He blessed and exalted) instructed us in everything which we require in the way of religion, through the intermediacy of the Prophets after having established for us the truth of prophecy by signs and miracles. He commanded us to believe these matters and to keep them. He also informed us that by speculation and inquiry we shall attain to certainty on every point in accordance with the Truth revealed through the words of His Messenger. In this way we speculate and search in order that we may make our own what our Lord has taught us by way of instruction.<sup>37</sup>

Rambam in several places explains the primacy of logic and reason over tradition and scripture. He writes:

Acceptance of beliefs based upon communal authority does not entail that one must doubt the capacity of reason to establish truth. The tradition will always agree with reason when the problem is within the domain in which reason is completely competent, e.g. In demonstrating that God is non-corporeal. Demonstrative arguments are never susceptible to refutation by claims based upon authority.<sup>38</sup>

Rambam only follows the plain meaning of scripture or of Rabbinic statements when they are in accord with his philosophical principles, or when there is no clear proof of a philosophical position.

What I myself desire to make clear is that the world's being created in time, according to the opinion of our Law – an opinion that I have already explained – is not impossible and

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37 p. 43-44

38 *Guide* I:28 p. 60.

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that all those philosophical proofs from which it seems that the matter is different from what we have stated, all those arguments have a certain point through which they may be invalidated and the inference drawn from them against us shown to be incorrect. Now inasmuch as this is true in my opinion and inasmuch as this question – I mean to say that of the eternity of the world or its creation in time – becomes an opine question, it should in my opinion be accepted without proof because of prophecy, which explains things to which it is not in the power of speculation to accede.<sup>39</sup>

In all cases where either scripture or the statements of the Rabbis seem to contradict philosophy he interprets those verses or statements allegorically. Hartman summarizes Rambam's view of the relationship between science and religion:

In his introduction to *Chelek*, Maimonides does not distinguish between the logical status of those principles of Judaism which can be established by reason and those which rest on the authority of tradition. However, Maimonides must account for the acceptance of principles grounded in the authority of tradition if he is to maintain that *Aggada* be included within a universal framework of truth. In the *Guide of the Perplexed* Maimonides does clarify the situation by offering definite criteria which justify one's acceptance of beliefs based on the authority of tradition. Simply stated, Maimonides claims that appeals to authority are justified when it can be shown that demonstrative reason is not able to offer certainty... Truths based upon demonstrative certainty, however, can never be contradicted by an appeal to

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<sup>39</sup> *Guide* II:16 (p. 293-4). See also *Guide* II:25 where Ramban explains his belief in the creation *ex nihilo* as opposed to the eternity of the universe not because of verses or tradition, but only because scientific, logical evidence is not definitive. Being that there is no clear proof for one view over the other, Rambam reverts to the simple meaning of the verses and Rabbinic statements.

prophetic authority.<sup>40</sup>

Even before Rambam, Rabbeinu Bachya ben Yosef ibn Paquda (1040-1080) in his book *Chovot Ha-Levavot* explicitly states the primacy of reason over all other methods of knowledge. For example, he claims that there is an obligation on anyone who is able to strive to understand the concept of the unity of God using logic and reason. He writes:

Anyone who is able to investigate this matter, and other similar logical matters, using intellect and reason, is obligated to do so according to his ability and strength of his knowledge... Someone who refrains from this intellectual inquiry is to be condemned, and considered like someone who is lacking in wisdom and action... The Torah has obligated us in this, as the verse states “know this day, and place it on your heart...” (Devarim 4:39)<sup>41</sup>

It turns out then, that the argument between Rambam (and those in his camp) about whether or not God has a body, is in fact an argument about whether the literal meaning of scripture and talmud is to be taken at face value when it seems to contradict logic and philosophy. Rambam, Rav Saadiah and Rabbeinu Bachya argue that any statement which contradicts logic must be understood allegorically. Conversely, one may, and must, use logic to try to understand the nature of God, which leads to a belief in His incorporeality. Rav Moshe Taku claims that logic is unreliable, and the only truth is that to be learned from the Torah. Therefore one can make no statements about God – for example, whether or not He has a body – which are based on philosophy. Since the Torah states that God has physical form, that is the only truth we can accept, even though it cannot be explained rationally. This is what the Raavad

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40 Hartman, D. (1976) *Maimonides, Torah and Philosophical Quest* Jewish Publication Society of America pp 122-3

41 *Chovot Ha-Levavot* shaar 1 chapter 3

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means in his attack on Rambam, that many people believe that God has a body because they understand literally the verses of scripture and words of aggadata.

### **Consensus of Medieval Ashkenazi Authorities**

The truth is that though most people nowadays would accept Rambam's position unquestioningly, a great number of medieval Ashkenazi authorities held either that logic was misleading and not to be trusted, or that it was too dangerous for most people, and therefore not to be studied. They were prepared to allow for the (possibly mistaken) belief that God has a physical form, rather than risk people using their logic or philosophy in a quest which may lead them to more dangerous things.<sup>42</sup>

Even Rashi, the earliest and foremost of Ashkenazi authorities implies that God has a physical body. In his commentary to Shemot 14:31 he explains that any reference to God's hand means a literal hand<sup>43</sup>. Another medieval authority, Rabbi Yishaya di-Trani also understands that Rashi believed that God can at times take physical form. He writes on the verse "For the curse of God is hanging" (Devarim 21:23).

Rashi explains that man is made in the image of God. But in

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42 The truth is that Rambam also acknowledges that the Torah uses terminology which implies physicality of God because it needs to speak in language which is understandable to the masses. See *Guide* 1:46 where Rambam writes: "necessity required that all of them [the multitude] be given guidance to the belief in the existence of God... and in His possessing all the perfections... The minds of the multitude were accordingly guided to the belief that He exists by imagining that He is corporeal, and to the belief that He is living, by imagining that He is capable of motion." (p. 98)

43 Though this comment of Rashi's alone does not necessarily define his position on God's body, I have subsequently read an article by Rabbi Natan Slifkin "Was Rashi a Corporealist?" in which he demonstrates that Rashi may have held that God could take physical form.

<http://www.zootorah.com/controversy/Vol7Slifkinwithletter.pdf>

Bereishit on the verse “let us make man in Our image” Rashi explained that it was in the image prepared for him. Why did he not explain in the image of God literally? The answer is that certainly man is not made in the image of the Creator... The reason he explains here ‘in the image of God is that when God appears to people He takes on the form of a person. But the image of God is not known.<sup>44</sup>

Rabbi Shlomo bar Avraham min HaHar<sup>45</sup> was one of the leaders of the campaign against Rambam, calling for a ban on the *Guide*. He wrote a letter to Rabbi Shmuel bar Yitzchak regarding the controversy which was raging about the works of the Rambam. His main argument is that the literal meaning of the Torah must be upheld. He claims that those who use philosophy arrive at conclusions which are against our tradition. In his letter he writes:

Regarding the arguments within our gates, and our zealousness for the sake of Torah of our Rock; We hear what some of the young and old people are saying. They announce new things that our ancestors never dreamed of, in order to destroy our tradition. They make analogies out of words of Torah and turn everything into metaphor and remove its meaning. For example the story of creation or the story of Kayin and Hevel, and the other stories of the Torah. We have heard publicly from the copyist who revealed all the things that the Rav (of blessed memory) used to hide about our Torah – that all the stories are metaphors and all the mitzvot which we do, and similar things like that. I heard them mocking the words of our Rabbis. When I heard these things I was shocked.... I fought with them many times, even though I am like a fool in their eyes.<sup>46</sup>

Rabbeinu Tam, the founder and leader of the school of Tosafot, decries knowledge of philosophy because of the potential dangers

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44 *Sefer Nimukei Chumash le-Rabbi Yishaya di-Trani*

45 Or Shlomo ben Avraham of Montpellier (first half of 13<sup>th</sup> century)

46 Cited in *Torah Shleima* Yitro p. 303

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that it poses. In *Sefer HaYasbar*, he writes:

There are kinds of knowledge that destroy faith, like external knowledge, heretical knowledge and knowledge of the philosophers. A servant of God has no purpose spending time on them, but should distance himself from them as much as possible. Before he would see any benefit from them he would lose his faith.... Even though the intention of philosophy is to know the unity of God, and once known to serve God, but the knowledge of the philosophers is like the ocean [and a person will never reach the end of the knowledge which would allow him to serve God].... A person who enters this field of knowledge cannot trust in himself that he will not lose his faith unless he has an expert and pious teacher who can teach him and protect him from those places that weaken faith. [Only] then can a person escape from the traps of philosophy and attain the benefit that he seeks. But if he reads books of philosophy by himself there is no doubt that his faith will be destroyed... therefore he must be very careful of it.<sup>47</sup>

Opposition to learning philosophy because of the inherent dangers is a common theme amongst many of the Ashkenazi halachic deciders. For example in *Sanbedrei Gedolah le-Masechet Sanbedrin* we find:

That which Rabbeinu Moshe [ben Maimon] writes in chapter 1 of *Hilbot Yesodei HaTorah* that God has no body or movement is certainly true. However that which he wrote at the end of *Hilbot Teshuva* that a person should dedicate himself to understand and know the wisdoms which make the Creator known to him, and he repeated this idea in many places, these words are not from our Torah. The sages of the Torah warned not to explain the 'works of the chariot' or the

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47 chapter 6 Kest-Lebovets edition p. 64-5

‘works of creation’ in public.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly Rav Moshe Isserless writes in his glosses to Shulchan Aruch that “A person should learn nothing aside from scripture, mishna, Gemara and poskim who follow from them. In this way he will acquire this world and the world-to-come. But he should not learn any other kinds of wisdom. However, it is permitted to learn other wisdoms occasionally... and this is referred to by the sages as ‘walking in the orchard’.”<sup>49</sup>

### Modern Expressions of this Debate

This same dispute as to the relative value of secular knowledge, philosophy and science when it comes into direct contradiction with the plain meaning of Torah texts continues to the present day. It takes on slightly different forms from the time of Rav Saadiah or the Rambam – the pressing issues are no longer the nature of God or creation ex-nihilo. But modern conflicts between science and, in particular Genesis, are still debated in one of two ways. Either the Torah must be considered primary, in which case the scientific approach is ignored, refuted, or made to tow the line to the simple meaning of the texts, or science is given greater weight, and the Torah is reinterpreted to fit within current understandings of science.

A modern proponent of the latter view is Rav Gedaliah Nadel, who spends half of his book *Be-Torato shel Rav Gedaliah* reinterpreting Bereishis in light of modern scholarship, science, philosophy and archaeology. He explains:

Rambam writes that his book was not written for those who are involved solely in learning [Torah] but for those who also learn wisdom of knowledge of reality. They are able to differentiate between things that are necessary, things which are impossible, and things which might be. They find in the

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48 (Jerusalem, 1972), volume 5, section 2, p. 116-118

49 Yoreh Deah 246:4

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Torah things which, if understood literally, are impossible according to reason. Therefore they are in great confusion... Should they reject intellect? That is not a satisfactory conclusion. Should they say that what is written in the Torah is not correct? This too is unacceptable.... The resolution that the Rambam offers is that there are things in the Torah that are not meant to be understood literally, but must be understood as metaphor and analogy.... The confusion that Rambam addresses... is regarding verses that imply physicality to God, which contradict philosophy which claims that God has no body. Nowadays we have already forgotten this issue. Rejecting God's physicality, which in those days was not so clear to all, no longer presents a problem nowadays. We have different issues. They are the [apparent] contradictions between the simple meaning of scripture and scientific knowledge.... The Torah doesn't teach us a profession.... It teaches us how to behave.... If the Torah teaches us that the world was created with ten utterances it is [in order to teach us]... look what a wonderful world was created and prepared for you, man, the final creation. Be careful not to destroy it... Now we will begin to learn the verses [and resolve these contradictions]<sup>50</sup>

However, the traditional view of Rav Moshe Taku and the Ashkenazi commentators has become far more popular nowadays. One modern approach to invalidating a rationalist approach to questions of religion is to claim that anyone who reaches logical conclusions which differ from the literal meaning of the Torah is not seeking truth but is under the influence of their personal partiality. In other words, the claim is made that the Torah offers the only 'true' intellectual and

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50 p. 79-82. It is interesting to note that this book was banned almost as soon as it was published, and attempts were made to discredit it and its author. This shows the depth of feeling on these issues, in much the same way that there were many who sought to ban the philosophical writings of Rambam in the middle ages.

rational approach, any alternative conclusions are not based on reason but on personal agendas, whether tacit or explicit. The first person to use this approach was the Alter of Slobodka in his book *Ohr HaTzafon*<sup>51</sup>. However this idea became well known and gained mainstream acceptance with the writings of Rav Dessler. He writes:

The question must be faced: how can we ever rely on our intellect to give us true conclusions in any matter? There is no alternative. We must admit that the intellect is powerless to produce reliable results in any moral problem... On what are your opinions based? On your intellect? As long as your regrettable qualities are still firmly entrenched, either more or less in the open, or hidden away in the depths of the heart, your intellect is worthless and its conclusions negligible. It may well be efficient enough to make mathematical calculations or to solve technical problems in which no personal or volitional element is involved. But where the problems are of a very different sort, where the solutions impinge on will and behavior, what possible claim can you have that we should take your conclusions seriously? Their final criterion is merely what “appeals to you,” and this we can recognize very well.<sup>52</sup>

This view has now become accepted by a large segment of Orthodox Jewry. This approach, where accepted wisdom of the Torah is viewed as the real ‘truth’ and rational thought is treated as suspect is particularly widespread among those who are newly religious. Writing for that audience, Rabbi Akiva Tatz states:

There are two parts to the mind – an outer part, the *mabat ha-chitzoni*, the “outer view” or “outer eye”, and the inner part,

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51 Vol. 2 parshat Toledot *koach hasbochad* on the words *ki tzayid be-fiv*.

52 *Strive for Truth* vol. 1 p. 170, 175. However, see Chazon Ish – *Emunah u-Bitachon* section 3 chapter 30 where he rejects the concept of partiality and claims that it undermines the entire halachic system.

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the *mabat ha-pnimi*, the “inner view” or “inner eye”. The “outer eye” is easy to define in words: it is that part of the mind which grasps the world through the five senses, and it includes the rational or logical faculty. It deals therefore with the finite, the measurable, the arithmetical, and the logical. Anything which this faculty can grasp can be expressed in words; can be tested and proved... The “inner eye”, the *da’at*... is intrinsic knowledge. It grasps things as they are and because they are, not because they can be measured or proved or expressed. In fact, the things which the *da’at* knows can never be expressed, proved or measured. They are never physical or finite.... This inner aspect of knowledge is you, the real you... A brief consideration shows that they [the things which *da’at* holds] are the most important in one’s inner life. Some of the components of *da’at* are: the knowledge of one’s own existence (this is the primary knowledge of *da’at*); the knowledge of the present; the knowledge of one’s own free will; the grasp that life has meaning; the grasp of intrinsic right and wrong; and ultimately... of a transcendent reality... the dilemma is obvious. How are all these areas to be examined, refined, and elevated in the mind if they cannot be proved or expressed? How can one ever begin to think about them logically? The answer is simple and staggering. Just as the external mind must be used to grasp those things which are accessible to it, so too the *da’at* itself must be used for its material. One must never attempt to use the one mode for the material of the other.... If proof is attempted, it collapses.<sup>53</sup>

Knowledge of God has been placed firmly in the domain of “*da’at*” - that which is super rational and beyond logic or critique. It is that which is known despite (or because of) the fact that they cannot be demonstrated or proven. While Rambam and the others within the

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53 *Living Inspired* p. 83-6

philosophical camp would argue that issues such as freewill, morality and God are to be understood using philosophical reason, Rabbi Tatz claims that they can only be known by “the real you”, the one that is beyond any argument or critique. Investigation of such matters must be delegated to the realm of intrinsic knowledge and self awareness. Our challenge is to rise above the world of logic and reason to arrive at Divine ‘truth’.

That is exactly our challenge; to rise above the purely finite, the mechanical, and to open wide the faculty of da’at, to being with the simple and profound awareness of “I am” and to strive towards sensing the higher Existence, towards knowing that Existence essentially, intrinsically.<sup>54</sup>

He repeats this idea that reasoned knowledge is not a valid methodology for seeking God in a later book, *Letters to a Buddhist Jew*:

No knowledge, indeed no experience, is absolutely reliable... Even knowledge of the simple fact that you are awake has no demonstrable proof... We never reach absolute knowledge... All knowledge is imperfect, never absolute. Even our immediate experience is not absolutely reliable. One of the consequences or applications of this fact is that we always need to act at least somewhat beyond our proofs. There is always a gap’ there must always be *emuna* in commitment and action.<sup>55</sup>

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54 *Living Inspired*, Rabbi Akiva Tatz p. 90. It is not clear to me how one goes about acquiring such knowledge. It seems to be assumed. Though perhaps that is entirely the point – it can never be arrived at by reason, and therefore can never be demonstrated or proven to another.

55 p. 129. Rabbi Tatz makes the distinction between two types of knowledge, rational and received, later in the book (p. 141-5). He claims that reason and scientific inquiry are limited, and the only way to gain knowledge of the real nature of the world is through Torah study. In a passage which reaches conclusions remarkably similar to the ideas of Rav Moshe Taku he writes:

The two primary avenues of access to that knowledge [of God’s

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In a questions and answers session recorded and uploaded to the internet, Rav Aharon Schechter, Rosh Yeshiva of Chaim Berlin in New York describes the correct approach to apparent contradictions between science and Torah. His words are almost identical to those of Rav Moshe Taku. In answer to the question, “How does one reconcile the apparent contradictions between Chazal and science?” Rabbi Schechter bases himself on the verse “It is the glory of God to conceal a thing; but the glory of kings is to search out a matter” (Mishlei 25:2). He explains:

There is a Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni Mishlei 25, remez 961*), “God saw all that He had made” (Bereishit). Rabbi Levi says in the name of Rabbi Chama bar Chanina, “From the beginning of the Chumash until “He completed “It is the glory of God to conceal a thing”. From here on “the glory of kings is to search out a matter” (Mishlei 25:2). There is that which is beyond our knowledge, which is not for us to delve into, and that is the creation... you don’t belong in that which is before you. You have a whole life’s work in that which is with you, not that which is before you... it’s not our assignment to know the creation... If you are a holy person, like Chazal, they have what to say, based on the secrets of

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existence] are the Sinai revelation and its unbroken transmission throughout subsequent history, and logical enquiry based on objective examination of reality...

The second method of gaining higher knowledge is logical enquiry... An open examination of the Universe suggests that a higher intelligence has designed and constructed it. There are classic sources that present this approach and they should be studied. I am not going to examine the importance of even the cogency of this line of thinking now... Scientific enquiry can take you to the border of the physical world. At the border it becomes apparent that something lies beyond, but what that something is requires other tools to discover. Using science you can demonstrate to a compelling degree that there is a zone beyond science; but to enter that zone you need Torah. That is why our main avenue of access to the knowledge we seek is Torah study.

Torah. That is not my business... I don't know the secrets of the Torah, and I don't know anyone who knows the secrets of the Torah... The simple meaning of Chumash is for us Torat Moshe – Moshe is true and his Torah is true... You have a problem? Ok. It is not a problem I am obligated to address... I don't have to think about it. I am obligated not to think about it.<sup>56</sup>

It is interesting to note that apart from this modern day version of Rav Moshe Taku's approach to the rejection of philosophical inquiry, the normative medieval Ashkenazi approach also has its modern parallels. Just as Rabbeinu Tam, Rema and others claimed that though it may be valuable, philosophical quests may be too dangerous for the masses, so too we find that the Chafetz Chaim refused to allow his son to learn Moreh Nevuchim, for fear that it may corrupt him. His son Aryeh Leib writes:

When I was young [my father] kept me away from involving myself with logic or philosophy. When he found out that I once bought myself a copy of Moreh Nevuchim he was very unhappy and he took it from me and hid it. After several years I found it by accident. He said to me once that if someone searches after proof it is a sign that he has thoughts of doubt – unless he is doing so to show to others who are confused and misled, like Rambam [did] in his time. One

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56 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TO01hVfDFjI>.

Compare this to *Ktav Tamim* p. 71:

It says in Bereishit Rabba: Who can contemplate the thunder of His strength? Rabbi Yehuda said, “[what is] this thunder? When He goes out no creature is able to know His handiwork or His actions.”... If you can't understand how thunder works, how much more so can you not understand how the world works! If someone says to you that they understand how the world works, say to him, “Who is man that he can come after the actions of the Supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed is He. If rabbi Yehuda would see that people are trying to know [about the nature of] the existence of God he would spit on them!

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cannot bring a proof from Avraham, who sought and searched [for philosophical truth] as explained in the Midrash, because he was the first, and he didn't learn this from his father – quite the opposite.... But we are the children of our parents who accepted the Torah on Mount Sinai, in the presence of thousands of thousands of people, and they heard the voice of God, why should we waste time and begin again from the beginning [finding proofs of God].<sup>57</sup>

There are those authors who would perhaps claim that they find a middle ground, though in fact for the most part they attempt a more 'scientific' version of bringing reason into line with Torah. In this group are authors such as Gerald Schroeder and Natan Aviezer, who try to make scientific knowledge fit into the simple meaning of the Torah. Though they show flexibility in their reading of the verses, they never reject the simple meaning in favor of scientific truth, but merely attempt to find ways of showing that there is no contradiction between the two.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, though Rambam claims that a person who believes that God has a physical body is a heretic, he is really arguing for rational Judaism, which rejects a literal understanding of verses and Rabbinic statements when they come into conflict with philosophical 'truths'. Conversely, Rav Moshe Taku espouses the mainstream Ashkenazi view, held by the majority of his contemporaries, that the Torah is the only source of truth, and to make it subservient to logic is to undermine the entire basis of the religion and religious 'truths'. Contemporary Rabbinic leadership has, for the most part, accepted this latter view, and rejects any attempts to bring Torah into line with science, or other forms of 'external' knowledge.



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57 *Sichot Chafetz Chaim* 'Dugma me-Darkei Avi Zatzal' 13