

A Light Unto Our Nation: R. Meir Simḥah of Dvinsk's Approach to Nationhood and Zionism in Meshekh Hōkhmah¹

By: JONAH STEINMETZ

I. Introduction

Biblical Commentary: A Forum for Defense and Expression of Traditional Values

Classically, biblical commentaries focus on simple understanding, homiletics, halakhah, and philosophy. A commentator may have additional goals and views of and responses to contemporary issues interwoven into the fabric of his elucidation. The interpretations and expositions may relate to the zeitgeist of the contemporary society as well as address significant issues relevant to the current social and political movements. For example, 19th century traditionalist commentators often incorporated responses to the Haskalah and Reform movements' modernization and modification of Jewish law and theology.² As Jay M. Harris explains, biblical exegesis has long been the “means through which rabbis established the authority of the extrabiblical laws and practices they inherited... and it was the tool they used to resolve more far-reaching problems, such as

¹ Many thanks to my teacher, Dr. Joshua Karlip, and my dear friend, Rabbi Dovid Bashevkin, who both reviewed and commented on an earlier version of this article. Mrs. Leslie Newman's patient, rigorous editing helped shorten and sharpen this piece, as well. Her time and effort are very much appreciated.

² This was a particularly popular forum, as the *maskilim* and Reformers attempted to sever “any connection between Jewish law and theology, on the one hand, and Jewish exegesis, whether halakhic or aggadic, on the other.” See Jay M. Harris, *How Do We Know This? Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism* (NY: SUNY, 1994), p. 138. In context, Harris describes the second of two strategies Israel ben Moshe Zamosc (a teacher of Moses Mendelssohn) promoted. Although Zamosc's role in the historical context of our discussion is not entirely direct or apparent, the words above seem reflective of the general trend he influenced.

Rabbi Jonah Steinmetz is a fellow in the Wexner Kollel Elyon at Yeshiva University and the director of Asicha Seminars, a learning program for post-seminary women.

contradictions within the Torah, or between the Torah and other biblical books.”³

R. Yehuda Cooperman asserts, however, that R. Meir Simḥah ha-Kohen of Dvinsk’s biblical commentary, *Mesbekeh Hokhmah*, differed from those of earlier traditionalist advocates.⁴ R. Cooperman contends that the context in which R. Meir Simḥah lived did not demand his engagement in polemic against ideological oppositions.⁵ His composition, *Mesbekeh Hokhmah*, in no way served as an attack against or response to contemporary issues. Rather, he dealt exclusively with interpretation and explanation of the verses themselves.

It is my contention, however, that *Mesbekeh Hokhmah* was R. Meir Simḥah’s platform to—not *only*, but *also*—consider, critique, and combat what he perceived as anti-Torah values permeating his historical and geographical context. R. Meir Simḥah utilized his biblical commentary as the forum for dissemination of ideals and ideologies countering the opposing views of his surrounding society.⁶ There are many examples that establish this fact.⁷

The goal of this essay is to note and investigate examples of R. Meir Simḥah’s conception of Eretz Yisrael and his responses to Nationalism, Zionism, and anti-Zionism in the period in which he wrote. A clear sense of R. Meir Simḥah’s ideological and political positions in relation to these movements is gleaned from an analysis of *derashot* in *Mesbekeh Hokhmah*. Comparing and contrasting his responses with the ideologies and policies of other leading figures in his geographic and intellectual circle yields a fuller picture of R. Meir Simḥah’s approach to Eretz Yisrael as a land and

³ Ibid., p. 3. Both Harris and R. Yehuda Cooperman list R. Jacob Zvi Meklenburg and R. Meir Leibush Malbim, among others, as leading traditionalist figures who fought the Haskalah and Reform through their biblical commentaries. See Harris, pp. 211-223 and R. Yehuda Cooperman, *Pirkei Mavo le-Feirush “Mesbekeh Hokhmah” la-Torah*, p. 1. Other noteworthy leaders, R. Samson Raphael Hirsch and R. David Zvi Hoffman, are equally significant, but beyond the scope of this essay. Harris treats these two figures, among still others, in his chapter titled “Midrash and Orthodoxy.”

⁴ See R. Cooperman, *Pirkei Mavo le-Feirush Mesbekeh Hokhmah*, p. 1. Cooperman associates this style with the “school of thought of the Gaon, R. Elijah of Vilna.”

⁵ R. Cooperman, *ibid.* See also Yaakov Elman, “The Rebirth of Omnisignificant Biblical Exegesis in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” *JSIJ* 2 (2003) 199-249, p. 219, for a clear, concise summary of R. Cooperman’s thesis.

⁶ Elman (p. 222) makes a similar argument against R. Cooperman’s thesis as well.

⁷ A closer analysis of this statement will, please God, be published by this author in the future. However, space constraints exclude that analysis here.

as a value. Ultimately, scrutinizing these passages in *Meshekh Hōkhmah* allows for a better understanding of R. Meir Simḥah's loyalty to, but lack of affiliation with, political parties such as Agudath Israel and Mizraḥi.

II. The Time and Place of *Meshekh Hōkhmah*

Analyzing the thematic responses to contemporary issues found in *Meshekh Hōkhmah* demands a note on the time and place in which it was composed. Actually, "the times and places in which it was composed" is a more accurate formulation. A brief biographical timeline provides for contextualization of *Meshekh Hōkhmah's* composition.

R. Meir Simḥah was born in 1843 (5603)⁸ in Butrimonys (Baltrimantz, in Yiddish), a small town in southern Lithuania. A child prodigy, he spent his first decade learning with his father and mastering vast amounts of biblical and talmudic literature.⁹ In 1856, his father brought him to Eishishok, a city bordering Belorussia in southeastern Lithuania, famous for its dense Jewish population. There, R. Meir Simḥah studied in the *Kollel Perushim* for three years under the guidance of a distinguished older student, R. Moshe Denishovsky. In 1859, he married Haya Makovski and moved to her hometown of Bialystok, Poland.¹⁰ Haya operated a business, assuming the family's financial responsibility while her husband studied in the local *beit midrash* for twenty-six years.¹¹ R. Meir Simḥah arrived in

⁸ Although there are contradictory records as to the exact year, this seems to be the most accurate report. See Yaakov M. Rapoport, *The Light from Dvinsk: Rav Meir Simcha, The Ohr Somayach* (Southfield: Targum Press, 1990), p. 18; R. Zev Aryeh Rabiner, *Maran Rabeinu Meir Simḥah ha-Koben* (Hebrew), pp. 22 and 232; R. Noson Kamenetsky, *Making of a Godol: A Study of Episodes in the Lives of Great Torah Personalities* (Jerusalem: Hamesorah Publishers, 2002), p. 420, note *n*.

⁹ R. Meir Simḥah periodically quotes his father in his work. See *Meshekh Hōkhmah*, *Shemot* 3:15-17; *Va-Yikra* 18:27.

¹⁰ The date and age of marriage are recorded by Rapoport, p. 27 and corroborated by the Bialystok ledger (*pinkas*), referenced in Rabiner, p. 22, footnote.

¹¹ There are conflicting reports on this. See Rabiner, p. 22 (footnote), quoting the Bialystok ledger (p. 283). See also Rapoport, p. 29. In studying his responsa, one notices that R. Meir Simḥah was still writing from Bialystok as late as 1886-7 (5647) and began writing from Dvinsk in 1887-8 (the year he assumed his rabbinic post there). We have no record of R. Meir Simḥah taking a professional position during his time in Bialystok, thus it is safe to assume that he spent all twenty-six years learning in the *beit midrash*.

Dvinsk (then Dunaburg, currently Daugavpils), a large city in southeastern Latvia with a significant Jewish population¹² in the spring of 1888 (5648). There, he assumed the rabbinical post which he would hold for the next four decades. R. Meir Simḥah died on the fourth of Elul, 1926 (5686).

It is well known that R. Meir Simḥah composed the manuscript for *Mesbekeh Ḥokhmah* before engaging in concrete work on his *Ohr Sameah*.¹³ Based on anecdotal evidence, the majority—if not all—of *Mesbekeh Ḥokhmah* was composed by R. Meir Simḥah during his early years in Bialystok. But if R. Meir Simḥah spent his days and nights in the *beit midrash* studying Torah, it is hard to imagine he had any political awareness or involvement in those years. A lack of cognizance of and connection to socio-political surroundings makes it challenging to write a book responding to contemporary issues. Research, however, shows he was, in fact, keenly aware of and involved in the world outside of the *beit midrash*, even during his time in Bialystok.

Some of R. Meir Simḥah's published responsa were composed while he resided in Bialystok. Although only a small number of published responsa are from this period, the fact that he was consulted and the severity of the issues about which he was consulted are both noteworthy.¹⁴ Alt-

¹² The 1897 census reported that 757,038 Jews resided in the greater Lithuanian territories. Dvinsk had a total population of 69,675, including a Jewish population of 32,400 (44 percent). See Mordechai Zalkin, "Daugavpils," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*. See also Joshua D. Zimmerman, *Poles, Jews, and the Politics of Nationality* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), p. 16, table 1.7.

¹³ Rabiner (p. 66) quotes R. Meir Simḥah's testimony to this. Rabiner (*ibid.*, p. 65) and Rapoport (p. 117) report that R. Meir Simḥah held off so long on publishing *Mesbekeh Ḥokhmah* because his grandfather, R. Ḥananyah ha-Kohen of Vavkavysk (Yiddish: Volkovisk) warned him to first publish novellae on topics in halakhah or Talmud, lest he forever be remembered as a *darshan* (preacher) and not a *lamdan* (Talmudist).

¹⁴ Only four such responsa exist in R. Meir Simḥah ha-Kohen, *She'eilot u'Teshuvot Ohr Sameah*, ed. R. Avrohom Ausband and R. Zvi Yehoshua Leitner (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 5758/1980). See Vol. 1, No. 1; Vol. 1, No. 7; Vol. 1, No. 8; Vol. 3, No. 26. Although this is a small sampling, only a fraction of R. Meir Simḥah's written responsa have been located and published. (See "Editors' Introduction," Ausband in *She'eilot u-Teshuvot Ohr Sameah* [p. 13] and "Editors' Introduction," Leitner [*ibid.*, p. 15] regarding the discovery and publishing of the manuscripts. See also Rapoport, p. 130.) Additionally, the use of this sampling of responsa relies not on quantity, but on content. The fact that major rabbinic

though he had never assumed any professional position, the rabbis of Europe still turned to him for guidance and halakhic decisions.¹⁵ In this sampling of cases, he was consulted on major issues in the *Even ha-Ezer* section of *Shulhan Arukh*, which comprises the laws of marriage and divorce, often regarded as the most severe.¹⁶ R. Meir Simḥah responded to a question about an adulterous woman and the potential dissolution of marriage based on a husband's unbacked testimony as to his wife's infidelity.¹⁷ He also addressed the permissibility of remarriage during a generally forbidden time period due to the life-threatening situation in which a woman and her infant child were living.¹⁸ He fielded inquiries regarding the legitimacy of *gittin* (writs of divorce) containing nicknames, as opposed to the preferred full name of the husband.¹⁹ In one case, R. Meir Simḥah references what he perceives as the lack of halakhic observance characterizing much of European Jewry, discarding a leniency so as not to exacerbate the problem.²⁰ Significantly, these responsa are addressed to rabbinic figures more active and experienced than he. In one case, R. Meir Simḥah responded to a query from R. Isaac Shur, the head of the *beit din* (rabbinical court) in Bucharest.²¹ Further, during R. Meir Simḥah's time in Bialystok, the town rabbi, R. Yom Tov Lippman Halperin, passed away.²² The large, prominent community turned to R. Meir Simḥah, unsuccessfully requesting he assume the position.²³

The reliance of major rabbinic figures on R. Meir Simḥah for *psak halakhah* in these stringent cases is telling not only of his erudition, but of his ability to assess situations and controversies beyond the four walls of

figures relied on R. Meir Simḥah for guidance on major halakhic issues is itself telling.

¹⁵ In almost every responsum, it is clear R. Meir Simḥah is responding to rabbinic figures, not laypeople.

¹⁶ *Poskim*—from medieval to contemporary—consistently describe their nervousness to decide on matters related to marriage and divorce as being due to “*humra d-eishet ish*” (the severity of [the status of] a married woman).

¹⁷ *She'eilot u-Teshuvot*, Vol. 1, No. 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, No. 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, No. 8.

²⁰ Vol. 1, No. 7.

²¹ Bucharest, the capital of Romania, had a significant Jewish population. In addition to leading the rabbinical court, R. Shur authored more than a dozen books on halakhah and other topics.

²² Halperin is most famous for his work *She'eilot u-Teshuvot Oneg Yom Tov*, which has a unique style consisting of a combination of halakhah and *pilpul*. He died in 1879.

²³ Rapoport, p. 50.

the study hall. It is also difficult to imagine such a distinguished rabbinical post being offered to a socially ignorant recluse. R. Meir Simḥah clearly had exposure to society, making him a significant source of guidance on halakhic matters and a suitable candidate for a prestigious rabbinic post.

Further evidence of R. Meir Simḥah's societal awareness and activity surfaces in the record of his involvement in a famous political episode involving R. Yehoshua Leib Diskin, the rabbi of Brisk. In 1876, Russian authorities arrested R. Diskin, threatening him with a lengthy prison sentence and potential exile to Siberia.²⁴ R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik took charge of a major rabbinical effort to obtain a reprieve for R. Diskin. He raised large sums of money for lawyers and bribes and formed a committee of rabbis and political activists devoted to freeing R. Diskin. R. Soloveitchik called upon a young R. Meir Simḥah—still quietly studying in Bialystok—to join the coalition, travel to Grodno, and partake in the rescue efforts.²⁵ R. Meir Simḥah acquiesced, joining an impressive group of older, established rabbis, including Rabbis Soloveitchik, Eliyahu Ḥayyim Meizel of Lodz, Abraham Shmuel of Plonsk, Yitzḥak Yeruḥum Diskin, and others. R. Diskin was ultimately released as a direct result of this organized rabbinic effort. The fact that R. Soloveitchik requested R. Meir Simḥah's assistance in these efforts shows that the latter was considered a capable, effective force. A certain social and political aptness is undoubtedly one of the requisite qualifications of an activist in such a mission. Given this diverse evidence of his social and political awareness, it is no surprise that R. Meir Simḥah's *Mesbekeh Ḥokhmah* contains reference to and commentary on contemporary issues.²⁶

Although it has been noted that *Mesbekeh Ḥokhmah* was composed during his younger years in Bialystok, it seems that the author either continued to add to his earlier composition, or at least returned to consult and edit it until well into his second project, *Ohr Sameah*. First, it has been

²⁴ For the full story, see Rapoport (pp. 33-38); see also Shalom Meir ben Mordekhai Valakh, *Ha-Seraf mi-Brisk: Toldot Hayav u-Fo'olo Shel ha-Gaon* etc. (Bnei Brak: Hotsa'at Tevunah, 1998 or 1999), pp. 216-252 (or the English version: Wallach, *Seraf of Brisk*, pp. 328-464); see also R. Ḥayyim Karlinsky, *Rishon l'Shoshélet Brisk* (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 5764), pp. 267-275.

²⁵ During this episode, R. Meir Simḥah and R. Soloveitchik developed a close relationship, ultimately contributing to the former's attainment of the rabbinic post in Dvinsk. (See Rapoport, pp. 48-9.)

²⁶ See, for example, *Mesbekeh Ḥokhmah*, *Shemot* 12:1; 12:27; 14:24; *Va-Yikra* 19:18; 19:32; *Devarim* 10:20; *Devarim* 30:20; *Megillat Esther* 9:24.

noted that R. Meir Simḥah would frequently reference his biblical commentary during his sermons in Dvinsk.²⁷ Further, *Mesbekeh Hokhmah* contains many explicit references to *Ohr Sameah*, including the exact location of specific passages.²⁸ In one place, R. Meir Simḥah references events which occurred in the year 5677 (1917/1918), the last decade of his life.²⁹ It is clear, then, that R. Meir Simḥah consulted and edited the manuscript of *Mesbekeh Hokhmah* regularly during the many years until its posthumous publication. This point is significant, because if one knows that *Mesbekeh Hokhmah* was composed and edited during two different times and in two different places, one can analyze its messages as responses to both settings' respective zeitgeists. As such, any given piece in *Mesbekeh Hokhmah* may have been written in either Bialystok or Dvinsk and is thus viewed considering the socio-political contexts of each.³⁰

²⁷ Rabiner, p. 66.

²⁸ See, for example: *Mesbekeh Hokhmah*, *Shemot* 4:19; *ibid.*, 19:17; *ibid.*, 20:13; *ibid.*, 21:14; *ibid.*, 21:19; *ibid.*, 22:16; *ibid.*, 29:42; *ibid.*, *Haftarat Parshat Tetzaveh*; *Va-Yikra* 2:14; *ibid.*, 6:20; *ibid.*, 15:13; *ibid.*, 18:10; *ibid.*, 19:16; *ibid.*, 20:12; *Be-Midbar* 6:9; *ibid.*, 9:7; *ibid.*, 38:28; *Devarim* 16:5; *ibid.*, 17:1; *ibid.*, 17:5; *ibid.*, 22:2; *ibid.*, 25:14.

²⁹ See *Mesbekeh Hokhmah*, *Haftarat Shabbat ha-Gadol* 3:17.

³⁰ It is unnecessary to prove that R. Meir Simḥah was aware of and involved in socio-political issues as rabbi of Dvinsk. There are, however, many specific examples of R. Meir Simḥah's involvement in such issues. He participated in the early stages of Agudath Israel, taking strong stances on issues like the propriety of rabbis learning the Russian language at the convention in St. Petersburg. The majority of his responsa are from his time as rabbi of Dvinsk. He was approached for advice on many sensitive decisions including the possibility of moving the Slabodka Yeshiva to Palestine (see Kamenetsky, *Godol*, p. 418; see also Shlomo Tikochinski, *Lamdanut, Mussar, v-Elitism. Yeshivat Slabodka m-Lita l-Eretz Yisrael* [Jerusalem: Shazar, 2016], p. 215) and dealing with controversial statements of R. Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook (see Shlomo Zalman Sonnenfeld, *Ha-Ish al ha-Homah* [Heb.], Vol. 3, p. 408). Reportedly, he also took a stance against the *Mussar* movement, in a conversation with R. Simḥah Zissel Ziv (see R. Shmuel David Wolkin, *Kitvei Aba Mori*, ed. Moshe Yoel Wolkin [Brooklyn: Moriah, 1982], p. 265). Some claim that R. Meir Simḥah was consulted regarding whether to close the Volozhin Yeshiva (see Shulamith Soloveitchik Meiselman, *The Soloveitchik Heritage: A Daughter's Memoir* [Hoboken: KTAV, 1995], p. 72; see also R. Hershel Schachter, *Divrei ha-Rav* [NY: OU Press, 2010], p. 215). As confirmed by Dr. Shaul Stampfer (in an email correspondence), there is no historical proof to this claim, and it is likely being confused with the convention in St. Petersburg (see also Schachter, *ibid.*, note 33). Each of these episodes requires its own study.

III. Nationalism and Zionism in Bialystok and Dvinsk

If 19th century Eastern Europe, characterized by political instability and constant cultural fluctuation, was like a turbulent ocean, then Eastern European Jewry was like a ship in stormy seas. Virulent anti-Semitism was rampant, contributing to both the volatility of the current Jewish situation as well as the danger to its future. Jonathan Frankel suggests that it was these main factors combined with “population explosion, chronic underemployment (and unemployment), poverty... and governmental harassment” that created the “crisis of Russian Jewry in the period of 1881-1917.”³¹ The strongest organized Jewish political reaction to this crisis was a sharp turn to nationalism and socialism.³² Nationalist trends were sweeping through Eastern Europe in this period, and many prominent figures, particularly from the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia, were swept away by them.

The sudden and drastic reversal in attitudes that marked the emergence of the new ethos was summed up brilliantly by Lev Pinsker in 1882 with his slogan, “self-emancipation.” Contained in this term was the conviction that the Jewish question could not—and would not—be solved by the grant of equal rights from above nor by a return to the status quo ante of traditional Judaism, but had to be won by total change, collective action, political planning, and organization. With liberalism and individualism pronounced a failure, the radical and collectivist ideologies—nationalism and socialism—naturally came into their own.³³

The general nationalist ideologies to which so many secular Jews suddenly subscribed had certain widely accepted features, but also broke off into multiple subgroups.³⁴

³¹ Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 1.

³² According to Ehud Luz, the crisis of Russian Jewry was but a catalyst. It was “the crisis of Jewish identity” which “was the decisive factor in the birth of modern Jewish nationalism.” Ehud Luz, *Parallels Meet: Religion and Nationalism in the Early Zionist Movement, 1882-1904* (JPS, 1988), p. 23.

³³ Frankel, *ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁴ It is beyond the scope of this essay to carefully analyze the defining characteristics of the various factions of Jewish nationalism. For excellent research devoted to this end, see Simon Rabinovitch, *Jewish Rights, National Rites: National Autonomy in Late Imperial and Revolutionary Russia* (Stanford University Press, 2014) p. 50. See also Joshua M. Karlip, *The Tragedy of a Generation: The Rise and Fall of Jewish Nationalism in Eastern Europe* (Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 5-6.

Although “the relationship of Zionism to Diaspora nationalism has proven far more complicated than once imagined,”³⁵ it is abundantly clear that there is a deep connection between the two movements.³⁶ This is evidenced by the fact that Leon Pinsker, an original nationalist, was selected as the first head of the Hovevei Zion movement in 1884. Zionism itself splits into multiple subgroups, most of which are subsumed under the branches of secular Zionism and religious Zionism, but the general Zionist ideology draws heavily from nationalist philosophies and motivations.

From the earliest years of nationalism and Zionism, Latgale—one of three major Russian provinces making up the region of Latvia³⁷—was a hotbed of pre-Zionist and Zionist activity. Within that area, “the most prominent activity of pre-Zionists was in Dinaburg-Dvinsk (now Daugavpils), which was considered to be one of the movement centers in Russia.”³⁸ Critical nationalist-Zionist organizations, including Hovevei Zion, had been founded in Dvinsk in the 1880s.³⁹ During this time, the committees in Dvinsk organized lectures on history and philosophy which, in large part, included discussions of nationalist and Zionist ideologies. “Lecturers tried to arouse in the audience love [of] the national culture, religion, and language of the forefathers.”⁴⁰ In his 1948 book, *Years of Life*, writer and Dvinsk native Aleksander Isbakh (pseudonym of Isaak Bakhrakh) reports that the “Zionist organization was very influential among the Jews of our town.”⁴¹ Of course, Zionism is but one example of nationalist movements that swept through Eastern Europe in these years.

Bialystok was no stranger to nationalist and Zionist movements. Aside from containing its fair share of Jewish socialists and Bundists, Bialystok served as the center for the young Hibbat Zion movement. In fact,

³⁵ Karlip, p. 8.

³⁶ See, for example, Yosef Salmon, “The Historical Imagination of Jacob Katz: On the Origins of Jewish Nationalism,” *Jewish Social Studies, New Series*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Spring-Summer, 1999), p. 161.

³⁷ See Dov Levin, “Latvia,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 26 August 2010.

³⁸ Boris Volkovich, “Zionist Movement in Latgale (till 1917),” *Comparative Studies Vol. II (1): Latgale as a Culture Borderzone* (Daugavpils: Daugavpils University Academic Press “Saule,” 2009), p. 55.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63. See also Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews: A Documented Study* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 176.

the chief rabbi of Bialystok, R. Samuel Mohilever (1824-1898) was especially active in founding the Hibbat Zion movement, eventually becoming a central leader of the organization.⁴²

Given the strong nationalist and Zionist trends in late 19th and early 20th centuries Dvinsk and Bialystok, it is no surprise that R. Meir Simḥah was intimately familiar with the ideologies, arguments, and plans of these movements.⁴³ His brilliance and societal awareness combined with his being deeply steeped in all Jewish literature made him eminently capable of developing and expressing his nuanced approach to the questions of Jewish nationhood and Zionism.

IV. R. Meir Simḥah's Approach to Jewish Nationhood and Nationalism

Nationhood and nationalism are not inherently secular concepts. The concept of a nation is Jewish—in some ways it is uniquely Jewish—and it is a topic of discussion amongst many religious Jewish thinkers.⁴⁴ The popular nationalistic ideology that permeated secular Jewish culture during this period, however, was inherently unorthodox. Nationalism was a natural transition from the Haskalah movement.⁴⁵ Jewish nationalism went even further, however, in disregarding the premier place of Torah observance in Judaism. The famed maskilic intellectual journalist Perets Smolenskin argued that “national feeling, more than religious institutions, constitutes the most important force for preserving the unity of the Jewish people.”⁴⁶ Smolenskin stated further that “the national covenant is the main thing, and religion can only strengthen this covenant.”⁴⁷ Smolenskin, along with many Eastern European Jewish nationalists, viewed religion as a means to the end of preserving Jewish nationhood. It would follow that if religious observance should ever pose a threat or even an inconvenience

⁴² See Luz, *Parallels*, p. 14. See also Yosef Salmon, “*Ha-Rav Shmuel Mohilever: Rabam Shel Hovevei Zion*,” *Zion* (Historical Society of Israel, 1991) (Heb.), pp. 47-78.

⁴³ In fact, we see a record of his personal interaction with R. Mohilever in Elyakim Getsel, *Ramat Shemuel* (Vilna: 1899), p. 22.

⁴⁴ In many cases, these thinkers discuss and debate foundational concepts of nationhood, including when and how the Jewish nation came into being. See, for example, R. Hershel Schachter, *Eretz ha-Zvi* (Brooklyn: Flatbush Beth Hamedrosh, 1992), ch. 17 for a collection of halakhic and philosophic literature on this topic.

⁴⁵ See Immanuel Etkes, “Haskalah,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 27 October 2010.

⁴⁶ See Luz, *Parallels*, p. 21.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

to the realization and maintenance of national unity, religion should be sacrificed for the ultimate goal of nationalism.

The concepts of nationhood and national unity are constant and consistent themes in *Mesbekeh Hokhmah*. R. Meir Simḥah regularly refers to the Jewish nation as singular and separate from the other nations of the world.⁴⁸ R. Meir Simḥah also repeatedly stresses the centrality of nationhood and national unity. R. Meir Simḥah is clear in holding nationhood as a necessary means to the goal of unification of God's name in the world.⁴⁹ In fact, he claims that most commandments found in the Torah are aimed at the goal of national unity. In explaining the reason for the tribes of Israel being represented on the Priest's breastplate, R. Meir Simḥah writes,

But on the heart, the source of all feelings, the nation of Israel is inscribed, to teach that one's feelings should be directed towards the commandments, of which the majority are [a means to] the unification of the nation; like the [building of the] Temple, ascension to Jerusalem during the holidays...tithes...because this is [all for] unification of the nation...⁵⁰

R. Meir Simḥah regularly describes the unity of the Jewish people as a single organism made up of various limbs and organs that are the individual members of the nation.⁵¹

The assertion of secular nationalists that this significant aspect of Judaism reigns supreme, however, is disputed aggressively by R. Meir Simḥah. The thought that preservation of national unity would trump the observance of God's commandments is ludicrous to any Orthodox rabbi,⁵² and R. Meir Simḥah argues that the Torah and its observance are the very source of Jewish nationhood.

There is no [true] concept of community for gentiles, because each gentile is independent. And the connection of the Jewish people is

⁴⁸ *Mesbekeh Hokhmah*, *Bereishit* 33:18; *Shemot* 6:6; *Haftarat Parshat Be-Midbar*; *Shemot* 6:6.

⁴⁹ *Mesbekeh Hokhmah*, *Va-Yikra* 18:4-5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, *Shemot* 12:21. This is a theme that repeats itself in *Mesbekeh Hokhmah*. I hope to produce a study on this in the future.

⁵¹ See, for example, *Mesbekeh Hokhmah*, *Shemot* 19:8; *Haftarat Parshat Devarim*; *Devarim* 4:29; *ibid.*, 14:3; *ibid.*, 29:9; *ibid.*, 34:8.

⁵² See R. Dr. Leo Levi, *Facing Current Challenges: Essays on Judaism* (Brooklyn: Hemed Books, 1998), p. 7, where this is explained in a succinct yet poignant manner. Levi is writing at the end of the 20th century; the context is quite different, but the sentiment is the same.

their birth and their unification to [the ends of] believing in one Lord and their collective guarantee and their bond one to the other within Torah and its commandments, as each one [of them] is completed by his friend through Torah.⁵³

Indeed, [in the case of] all other nations, their connection to one another is a civil, nationalistic matter which stems from their birth into the nation, their dwelling in the same land, and their shared ideologies. Not so is the portion of Jacob [i.e., the Jewish nation]. The national connection is so great because the Torah was given to the nation, and according to the decisions of its sages and great [leaders], so are the ways of God and His providence continued.⁵⁴

The very bond of the Jewish people exists only within the context of Torah commandments. Jewish nationhood, says R. Meir Simḥah, is not a form of pragmatic unification of individuals with common ideologies and ancestries and a shared concept of society and ethics. It is not simply a genetic or geographic coincidence that the Jewish nation exists. Jewish nationhood is founded solely upon Torah values, as per the divine will.⁵⁵ In one place, R. Meir Simḥah even suggests that if the Jewish people “forget the covenant of their forefathers and do not walk in their ways” they will have essentially dismissed their status as an ancient nation, dissolving their nationhood and forfeiting the benefit of the divine presence resting upon them.⁵⁶

While R. Meir Simḥah stresses the significance of the concept of Jewish nationhood and national unity, he repeatedly clarifies that such ideologies are meaningless when divorced from Torah observance. The notion of Jewish nationhood is a product of God’s Torah, and its preservation is predicated on unflagging commitment to its commandments.

V. R. Meir Simḥah’s Approach to Eretz Yisrael and Zionism Love of Eretz Yisrael

The fact that R. Meir Simḥah opposed secular Zionism need not be proven. His feelings about the Land of Israel notwithstanding, no movement divorced of commitment to Torah could elicit any respect or approval from him.⁵⁷ This section will analyze R. Meir Simḥah’s approach

⁵³ Ibid., *Be-Midbar* 15:13-14.

⁵⁴ Ibid., *Va-Yikra* 23:21.

⁵⁵ See also *ibid.*, *Shemot* 12:14 and *Va-Yikra* 18:4-5.

⁵⁶ *Bereishit* 46:2.

⁵⁷ Although, in contrast to many other Orthodox rabbis of his time, R. Meir Simḥah did not lash out against secular Zionists. In fact, he was described as

to Zionism overall, with specific focus on his reaction to religious Zionism and the Mizraḥi movement.

R. Meir Simḥah's feelings towards Zionism have long been clouded in ambiguity. This ambiguity is perhaps best summarized by R. Isaac Nissenbaum in recording his visit to Dvinsk. R. Nissenbaum writes,

I asked the Zionists how the rabbis of Dvinsk relate to Zionism. Are they with us or against us? I heard the following answer: "R. Meir Simḥah quibbles about this from time to time, but we cannot discern his true opinion. Anyway, he certainly does not oppose [us]."⁵⁸

R. Meir Simḥah was not shy about his love and longing for the Land of Israel. He was always eager to hear reports from those who travelled to Palestine and were witnesses to or participants in its settlement.⁵⁹ On more than one occasion, he expressed his deep yearning for the land in writing. Rabiner notes that R. Meir Simḥah would regularly sign his letters with poetic pining for redemption and return to the Land of Israel.⁶⁰ When R. Yisrael Abba Citron eulogized his teacher, R. Meir Simḥah, he described him as a "*bovev Zion amiti*" ("true lover of Zion").⁶¹

In 1917, the Balfour Declaration was passed, stating Great Britain's support of "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." The reactions to this proclamation varied based on political and religious affiliation.⁶² In Dvinsk, the Jews celebrated, gathering in a local synagogue for special ceremonies. They invited R. Meir Simḥah to attend the events, but many were uncertain that he would. When he received the invitation, R. Meir Simḥah replied that he would attend "without any hesitation or doubt whatsoever." He continued to say that he did not care in the least bit that "some people will not be pleased with this

"tolerant" of them (see note below). See also Rabiner (p. 161 and p. 165). See also Rapoport (pp. 106-7). For an example of the contrasting approach of Orthodox rabbis, see Luz, *Parallels*, pp. 48-9, 51, 214.; see also Shimon Yosef Meller, *Undot v'Hanbagot l'Beit Brisk*, Vol. 4, pp. 187-211.

⁵⁸ R. Isaac Nissenbaum, *Alei Haldi* (Jerusalem, 1968), Ch. 17. See also *Hidushei R. Citron* where, in his eulogy for R. Meir Simḥah, R. Citron says, "Even though [R. Meir Simḥah] was concerned that Zionism should not turn into messianism, he was satisfied to simply stand apart from, but not fight against it."

⁵⁹ Rabiner, p. 161.

⁶⁰ P. 165.

⁶¹ *Hidushei R. Citron*, p. 572.

⁶² See Yitzhak Krauss, "*Ha-Tigboret ha-Teologit al Haẖbarat Balfour*," Bar Ilan, Vol. 28-9 (5761), pp. 81-104; and Isaiah Friedman, "The Response to the Balfour Declaration," *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Apr., 1973), pp. 105-124.

[decision].”⁶³ In 1921, Menahem Mendel Finkelman, an emissary of the World Zionist Organization, visited Dvinsk. Finkelman requested that R. Meir Simḥah publish an official letter encouraging Jews of Latvia to donate to Keren ha-Yesod, the main organization involved in the settlement of Palestine.⁶⁴ R. Meir Simḥah agreed to write a letter, penning what would become his famous published remarks about the Balfour Declaration and his attitude towards settlement of Palestine.⁶⁵

... From the day our holy Torah was given, prophecy has never ceased to command us to settle the land [of Israel]. There is no section in the Torah which bears no mention of the Land of Israel... From the day that Zion and Jerusalem were singled out, David in his praises [i.e., Psalms], Isaiah in his visions, Jeremiah in his rebukes, and Ezekiel in his parables never ceased to stress the commandment of settling the land... So too in the Grace after Meals, we pray for the land and Jerusalem... Indeed, in this century, rays of light have shone through the efforts of activists... but many rabbis have opposed it... However, providence has intervened, and at a conference... it was decreed that the Land of Israel will be [given] to the nation of Israel... [And so,] the command to settle the Land of Israel which is as weighty as all the Torah commandments [combined] has returned to its place. It is [therefore] incumbent upon each person to support, to the extent that he can, the fulfillment of this command.

The words of the one who awaits seeing the salvation of Israel,
Meir Simḥah Kohen⁶⁶

In another letter, R. Meir Simḥah notes that it is “simply superfluous” to express the significance of the command to settle the Land of Israel.

⁶³ Rabiner (p. 160); Rapoport (pp. 105-6).

⁶⁴ See Rabiner (p. 162) and Rapoport (pp. 101-2).

⁶⁵ Although the letter was written in the context of an appeal on behalf of Keren ha-Yesod, R. Meir Simḥah’s letter deals exclusively with feelings towards and support of settling Palestine, without any explicit mention of Keren ha-Yesod or any Zionist organization. This important observation was also made by Eitam Henkin (see Eitam Henkin, “*Yahaso shel ha-Ray*”*b Kook l-Keren ha-Yesod*,” *Ha-Maayan*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (2011), pp. 75-90 (Heb.).

⁶⁶ This letter was first published in *Ha-Tor*, Vol. 3 (1922). It has subsequently been published in Rabiner, pp. 163-5; R. Menahem Mendel Kasher, *Ha-Tekunyah ha-Gedolah* (Jerusalem, 5629), Vol. 1, pp. 206-7 (see also *ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 729-30); Abraham Jacob Slucki, *Shivat Zion* (Warsaw, 5652) (in the republished edition: Jerusalem, 5745); Rapoport, pp. 102-4.

[W]hat Jewish person would doubt this?... All the details of the Torah fit with the promise of the land [of Israel] and its settlement... And so too, our Torah is filled with praise for the Land of Israel...⁶⁷

R. Meir Simḥah stresses the imperative to settle and dwell in the Land of Israel in various places in his *Mesbekeh Hokhmah* as well.⁶⁸

In fact, it is this yearning for the land and its settlement that contributed to the difficulty of a major decision in his life. Over the course of his four decades in Dvinsk, R. Meir Simḥah received many requests from large Jewish communities to become their rabbinic leader.⁶⁹ Perhaps most notable is the invitation to become the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, which R. Meir Simḥah received in 1906. He was invited to come to Jerusalem, at R. Ḥayyim Ozer Grodzenski's suggestion.⁷⁰ R. Meir Simḥah refused this offer, but not without a heavy internal struggle. His deep, abiding love for the Land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem was no small factor in the challenge of this decision.⁷¹

⁶⁷ This letter appears in R. Asher Bergman's *Ha-Ohr Sameah* and was republished at the end of the R. Cooperman edition of *Mesbekeh Hokhmah*, Vol. 3. In 1889, religious Zionists—particularly the Nes Ziyonah society—commenced an initiative to gather approbations for religious Zionism from Orthodox rabbis. A.J. Slucki volunteered to collect and edit an anthology of these approbations. In 1892, he published this anthology under the title, *Shivat Zion*. See Luz, pp. 111-13. For a complete, detailed recounting of the background to this publication, see Yosef Salmon's introduction to the 1998 Dinur Center edition of *Shivat Zion*. R. Meir Simḥah was asked to contribute to this volume. He wrote a significant and detailed letter to Slucki, outlining the imperative to settle the Land of Israel and registering his complaints against certain movements. Slucki, however, did not publish this letter. R. Cooperman suggests that he did so because he feared “revelation of the bitter truth about the Ḥovevei Zion movement.” The letter was later discovered and printed in *Dos Vort* (Vilna, 14 Ḥeshvan 5687) and *Kol Yisrael* (Vol. 9, 5687).

⁶⁸ For example, see *Mesbekeh Hokhmah*, *Bereishit* 12:5; *Devarim* 11:31. Interestingly, in *Mesbekeh Hokhmah*, *Bereishit* 12:5, R. Meir Simḥah argues that this biblical command applied to Abraham as well, even though he well predated the giving of the Torah. This is characteristic of R. Meir Simḥah's style, as discussed by R. Cooperman in his *Pirkei Mavo*.

⁶⁹ See Rabiner, p. 49 (footnote).

⁷⁰ See Rabiner, p. 50. See also *Uvdot v'Hanbagot* (ibid.). See also Shlomo Zalman Sonnenfeld, *Ha-Ish al ha-Ḥomah* (Heb.), Vol. 1, p. 251, for a partial list of other rabbis who were approached at the time, including R. Isaac Blazer and R. Eliezer Gordon.

⁷¹ See Rabiner (p. 49). The community of Dvinsk was extremely opposed to losing their beloved leader. On 22 Adar, 1906, the community wrote a letter to the

The clear, public affection R. Meir Simḥah displayed for the Land of Israel and its settlement sets him apart from the camp of traditionalist anti-Zionists. Aside from his reaction to Zionism being significantly more muted than that of his contemporary religious leaders, R. Meir Simḥah rejected one of their prime arguments against Zionism and settlement of Israel. Traditionalist anti-Zionist activists, like those affiliated with Agudath Israel, relied heavily upon a literal read of an aggadic statement in the Talmud.⁷² The sages delineate three oaths that are binding among Jews and gentiles, one of which is an oath that the Jewish people will not ascend to reconquer the Land of Israel by force. R. Meir Simḥah accepted this literal understanding of the Talmud. He even used his characteristic creativity to locate a scriptural reference to these oaths.⁷³ However, in his letter relating to the Balfour Declaration, R. Meir Simḥah proclaimed that the nations of the world now agree to our right to settle the Land of Israel, thus it is no longer a violation of the oath to do so.⁷⁴ This proclamation, along with the aforementioned textual and anecdotal evidence, shows that R. Meir Simḥah did not fit neatly into the camp of Agudath Israel's leading rabbis.

Based on this and other anecdotal evidence, some have claimed that R. Meir Simḥah embraced and supported the Mizraḥi movement wholeheartedly.⁷⁵ It is critical, however, that the distinction between love of Israel and Zionism be clarified.⁷⁶ R. Meir Simḥah's deep affection and yearning for Eretz Yisrael, concern and respect for its settlers, and excitement regarding the Balfour Declaration in no way make him a Zionist. In

rabbis of Jerusalem begging them to cease and desist. See Rabiner (p. 50) and Rapoport (p. 65). Rabiner claims that this is the reason that R. Meir Simḥah ultimately decided to remain in Dvinsk. See, however, *Hidushei ha-Rav Citron*, p. 572 (referenced in Rabiner, pp. 232-3) where R. Citron contends that he refused the Jerusalem offer due to family reasons.

⁷² Bavli, *Masechet Ketubot* 111a.

⁷³ See *Meshekh Hokhmah, Bereishit* 50:24.

⁷⁴ Compare to R. Abraham Borenstein's approach (*She'eilot u-Teshuvot Avnei Nezer, Yoreh Deah* 454:56).

⁷⁵ See Rabiner (p. 158) for R. Samuel Jacob Rabinowitz's remarks to this effect.

⁷⁶ For more examples of the articulation of this distinction, see Levi, *Facing Current Challenges*, p. 14; see also R. Dr. Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, *Hamesh Derashot* (Jerusalem: Mahon Tal Orot, 5734), pp. 24-5; see also R. Soloveitchik, "Mah Dodech mi-Dod" in *Divrei Hagut v-Haaracha* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization), pp. 91-2 about R. Yitzhak Zev Soloveitchik; see also R. Meir Halperin, *Ha-Gadol mi-Minsk: R. Yeruḥum Yehuda Leib Perlman, Toldotav v-Korotav* (Feldheim, 5673, 5751, 5754, republished: 1993), p. 184.

one letter, he explicitly criticizes the Hovevei Zion movement.⁷⁷ Along with fourteen other leading religious rabbis, he signed a strongly worded letter that opposed the establishment of *Vaad ha-Leumi*.⁷⁸ R. Meir Simḥah notably never joined the Mizraḥi movement; nor did he ever publicize his unofficial loyalty to them. As Citron described,

He was a true lover of Zion, and [he was] tolerant of the freethinkers... [H]e felt satisfied standing apart [from Zionism] but did not fight against it.⁷⁹

In fact, on more than one occasion, R. Meir Simḥah expressed hesitation about Zionism and doubts about the motives and actions of Zionist movements. In a eulogy delivered in honor of R. Meir Simḥah, R. Ḥayyim Zev Harash reported that

the *Gaon* [i.e., R. Meir Simḥah] was beloved in the eyes of all. Everyone claimed him as their own. Agudath Israel says he was theirs, the Ḥasidim say he was theirs, and the “Zionists” say he was theirs. And this is the truth, because he would find positive aspects in every group. And so, he once said to me in conversation... that in every group and in every organization, there are found good aspects and evil aspects... [A] person who stands on the side, a neutral person, is able to truly know and understand the good aspects found even in the lowliest of the groups; and to find the evil aspect which exists even in the finest of the groups.⁸⁰

His failure to officially associate with the Mizraḥi or other Zionist movements, then, cannot be viewed as a technicality. Rather, R. Meir Simḥah intentionally avoided any Zionist affiliation.

Although he never officially joined Agudath Israel either, he never objected to his selection as a member of its *Moetzet Gedolei ha-Torah* (Council of Torah Masters) and was highly apologetic about his absence at the first conference of the organization, saying

Alas, with all the desire of my heart I chose to be a comrade to [you] God-fearing [men]... and to be counted among [those present] at the time of the gathering of the righteous. But my poor health and other

⁷⁷ See his letter to Slucki, referenced above.

⁷⁸ See R. Ḥayyim Ozer Grodzenski, *Iggerot R. Ḥayyim Ozer*, vol. 1, pp. 311-12 (no. 289).

⁷⁹ *Ḥidushei R. Citron*, *ibid.*

⁸⁰ Ḥayyim Zev Harash, *Simḥat Ḥayyim*, pp. 170-1. See also Rabiner, p. 28, where this is quoted, but the explicit references to Agudath Israel, Ḥasidism, and Zionism are omitted.

reasons prevented me from realizing this desire... God should help you to benefit our holy religion and to promulgate knowledge of God and His Torah amongst [the people of] Israel.⁸¹

Given Agudath Israel's harsh stance against Mizrahi and Zionism,⁸² it is hard to imagine that a man could pledge allegiance to both.

It is as confusing as it is fascinating that both Zionist and anti-Zionist movements claimed R. Meir Simḥah as their own while fully aware of his association with the rival camp.⁸³ What is unmistakable, however, is that R. Meir Simḥah never wholeheartedly embraced any religious-Zionist movement. Given his unique passion for settlement of Palestine and his more liberal stance towards irreligious settlers, one wonders why he avoided such affiliation. A closer look at excerpts from *Mesbekeh Ḥokhmah* and other writings allows for a fuller understanding of R. Meir Simḥah's approach to Eretz Yisrael and his abstention from Zionist and religious-Zionist movements.

R. Samuel Mohilever and Ḥovevei Zion

Pre-state religious Zionism posed many theological threats to religious Judaism leaving leading rabbinic figures skeptical about the tolerability of such a movement.⁸⁴ Not the least disconcerting of the many features of Zionism and religious Zionism were their messianic undertones.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Moshe Shonfeld, et. al., *Mi-Kattovitz ad Yerushalayim* (Tel Aviv: Hotzaat Netzah, 1953/4), p. 37.

⁸² See, for example, Gershon Bacon, "Agudas Yisroel," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (19 August 2010); see also Gershon Bacon, "Imitation, Rejection, Cooperation: Agudat Yisrael and the Zionist Movement in Interwar Poland," *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003), pp. 85-94.

⁸³ See, for example, Rabiner (pp. 158-9). This was not the case with other religious-Zionist figures such as R. Isaac Jacob Reines who were categorically rejected by Agudath Israel. (See Geula Bat-Yehuda, *Isb ha-Meorot* [Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1985], pp. 128-9; see also Luz, p. 229.)

⁸⁴ See, for example, Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism* (translated by Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman) (Chicago: Chicago Press, 1996), p. 10.

⁸⁵ A discussion of the theological issues within messianic ideology is beyond the scope of this essay. For a brief introduction, see Eli Lederhendler's contribution to Jonathan Frankel and Universitah ha-‘Ivrit bi-Yerushalayim, *Studies in Contemporary Jewry: Volume VII: Jews and Messianism in the Modern Era: Metaphor and Meaning* (Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1991), p. 14.

Whereas the foundational messianic idea was always linked to a passionate but passive pining for Heavenly redemption, “[r]eligious Zionism did, indeed, introduce an activist element to the idea of national redemption.”⁸⁶ The best known “forerunners of Zionism,” Rabbis Zvi Hirsh Kalischer and Judah Hai Alkalai, certainly incorporated messianic ideas.⁸⁷

R. Samuel Mohilever, representative of many leading thinkers of the *Hibbat Zion* societies, continued this trend by utilizing messianic ideology and imagery to convey his religious-Zionist message, albeit less radically than his predecessors.⁸⁸ When the first *Hovevei Zion* societies were founded across *fin de siècle* Russia, a diverse crowd of assimilated, semi-assimilated, moderate, and observant Jews joined forces to achieve nationalist-Zionist goals. This new relationship which spanned the gamut of Judaism was emphasized by leaders like Pinsker.⁸⁹ R. Mohilever was among the many leaders who viewed this reconciliation as one of the main achievements of the fledgling movement.⁹⁰ An extreme stress on national unity can be doubly problematic for the traditional religious thinker. One of the issues in focusing heavily on national unity is that it conjures messianic images of utopian redemption. In fact, R. Mohilever drew this connection himself. Ehud Luz notes that

Rabbi Mohilever, for example, saw in it a sign of “the beginning of the redemption” (*athalta d’genulah*) and thought that if *Hibbat Zion* had come into existence only for that end, it had served its purpose.⁹¹

In referring to the national unity engendered by *Hibbat Zion* as the “*athalta d’genulah*,” R. Mohilever explicated the link between Zionism and Messianism.⁹² Elsewhere, R. Mohilever is quoted to have said,

⁸⁶ Eliezer Don-Yehiya, “Messianism and Politics: The Ideological Transformation of Religious Zionism,” *Israel Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2, p. 241.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 241-2. See also Ravitzky, *Messianism*, pp. 26-32.

⁸⁸ Ravitzky (p. 32) notes these overtones in R. Mohilever’s thought and writing as well but claims that this approach was waning.

⁸⁹ See Luz, *Parallels*, p. 31.

⁹⁰ See Luz, Chapter 2 note 54, quoting M.L. Lilienblum as reporting that R. Mohilever once told him that his endeavors for Zion were “not only because of the sanctity of Eretz Yisrael,” but “for the sake of national survival.”

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁹² This is not to say that the term “*athalta d’genulah*” is inherently irreligious or even radically messianic. Major leaders of the traditional Orthodox school of thought have entertained or even accepted such a notion. For an example of the former, see Ravitzky’s (pp. 1-3) discussion of R. Moses Soffer. For an example of the latter, see Ravitzky’s (Chapter 1, note 68) quotation from R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin.

It is self-understood that men who have devoted all their lives to Torah and worship and know nothing beyond the walls of the House of Study, are incapable of bringing about our redemption through natural means.”⁹³

Aside from being a seemingly disparaging remark about his opposition and an insinuated disregard for the place of halakhists, this statement yet again refers to the religious-Zionist movement as one aimed at “bringing about our redemption through natural means.”

R. Meir Simḥah explicitly and emphatically rejects the messianic philosophy which he associates with the Hovevei Zion movement.

You asked me... to express my opinion regarding the new movement which came to be in our times... by the name of “Hovevei Zion” are they called... [F]or one who looks at the history of the Jewish people in exile with open eyes sees that at some times crazy, imaginative people arise from among our nation... and place their trust [in the idea] that the redemption is close in coming. And being that their words are [destructive] and all their acts are [ensnaring], many from the nation of God left the religion and the nation and denied the hope of the future... Behold! How terrifying is the sight of the enthusiastic [people] who go out saying: “This is the way which leads to the ultimate redemption!”⁹⁴

R. Meir Simḥah rejects Hovevei Zion’s messianic tone and argues that its effects can be disastrous to the Jewish people and their faith.⁹⁵ This is corroborated by Citron’s report that his teacher’s main concern was that “Zionism should not turn into messianism.”⁹⁶ R. Meir Simḥah continues in his letter by comparing the messianic underpinnings of Hovevei Zion to the 17th century Sabbateanism that wreaked havoc within Judaism.⁹⁷

As mentioned, R. Mohilever’s focus on national unity as an end is doubly problematic. Aside from the messianic implications of this approach, such a philosophy implies a nationalism theoretically divorced of

⁹³ See *Sefer Shemuel*, p. 154, translated by Luz in *Parallels*, Chapter 1, note 48.

⁹⁴ From R. Meir Simḥah’s letter to Slucki.

⁹⁵ See Maimonides’s “Epistle to Yemen” for a similar argument as to the destructive effects of attempting to determine the time of Messiah’s arrival.

⁹⁶ *Hidushei R. Citron*, *ibid.*

⁹⁷ R. Meir Simḥah is not the only one to compare Zionist movements to Sabbateanism. R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik denounced Hibbat Zion as a “new sect like that of Shabbetai Zvi, may the name of the wicked rot, which it is a [positive commandment] to annihilate!” See Luz, p. 116 and Ravitzky, p. 13.

religious observance. Even if unintended, such a focus opens the way to assuming national unity can trump observance.⁹⁸ According to R. Mohilever, the restoration of Jewish national unity had “decisive” weight.⁹⁹ R. Mohilever wrote,

It is better to live in the Land of Israel, in a city whose majority are non-Jews, even though this may lead one to throw off the yoke of the Torah and commandments, than to live outside of the land in a city whose majority are Jews, even if he observes the commandments.¹⁰⁰

In *Meshekh Hokhmah*, R. Meir Simḥah almost explicitly disputes R. Mohilever’s assertion that a life in Israel devoid of Torah observance is valuable.

...[You] should not say that you inherited the land [of Israel] because of your righteousness and that if you sin like all other nations there will still be no more righteous nation than you; and [that God will say] “What shall I do? [Would I] switch my faithful nation with an idolatrous nation?!” This is not so!... [Rather,] if you become evil, the land will spew you out just as it spewed out the nations which preceded you.¹⁰¹

Here, R. Meir Simḥah stresses that God will only allow for Jewish inhabitation of the Land of Israel if they adhere strictly to the commandments of His Torah. Elsewhere, R. Meir Simḥah states that the miraculous blessings that the Land of Israel is to give its Jewish inhabitants will not be realized unless they are fully committed to the observance of Torah. With this, he explains a difficult sentence structure. The verse (Deuteronomy 6:3) states: “You shall hearken, O Israel, and beware to perform, so that it will be good for you... as *Hashem*, the God of your forefathers, spoke for you—a land flowing with milk and honey.”¹⁰²

According to the rules of Hebrew language, it should have said, “in the land flowing etc.” [i.e., “so that it will be good for you... in the land flowing milk and honey,” as opposed to “so that it will be good for you...a land flowing with milk and honey”]. However, it is hinting that the blessing of the Land of Israel is dependent upon the choice of its children [i.e., its Jewish inhabitants]. If they listen to the voice of God, then the land will flow with milk and honey... This is what

⁹⁸ See Luz, *Parallels*, p. 47.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ See R. Mohilever’s letter in Slucki, *Shivat Zion*. The translation above is taken from Luz, Chapter 2, note 54.

¹⁰¹ *Meshekh Hokhmah*, *Shemot* 3:8.

¹⁰² Translation: Artscroll’s *Chamishah Chumshei Torah*, Stone Edition.

is meant [by the words]: “to perform, so that it should be good for you...” and the land will be “as *Hashem*, the God of your forefathers, spoke for you—a land flowing with milk and honey.” For if you do not listen to His voice, then the land will not flow with milk and honey.¹⁰³

To live in the land without observing the Torah is not better than living outside the land with Torah observance. In fact, according to R. Meir Simḥah, quite the opposite is true.¹⁰⁴

R. Mohilever and Ḥibbat Zion’s emphasis on national unity as an end was intolerable to R. Meir Simḥah. True, R. Mohilever accepted Torah observance as generally significant, but any compromise on halakhah for the sake of nation or state is inarguably out of bounds in the thought of R. Meir Simḥah. The idea of religious nationalism as an end is rejected within the very same passages in *Mesbekeh Hokhmah* which reject secular nationalism.

R. Isaac Jacob Reines and Mizraḥi

Though prevalent in early stages of religious Zionism, the doctrine of redemption made very little impact and gained very little support among the majority of religious Jewry and its rabbinic leadership. Even the subsequent leaders of movements tied to R. Mohilever and Ḥovevei Zion steered clear of messianism, stressing motives such as Jewish unity and sanctity of the Land of Israel, while repressing any redemptive inuendo.¹⁰⁵ R. Isaac Jacob Reines was no stranger to messianic Zionism and the Ḥibbat Zion movement. He worked closely with Kalischer in the 1860s and

¹⁰³ *Mesbekeh Hokhmah, Devarim* 6:3.

¹⁰⁴ See also *Mesbekeh Hokhmah, Shemot* 15:16.

¹⁰⁵ Ravitzky, p. 32. In fact, this departure from messianism from the mid-1880s and on was a conscious one. See Ravitzky, pp. 35-6. A more comprehensive investigation would certainly consider the writings of R. Isaac Nissenbaum. Nissenbaum served as R. Mohilever’s assistant in the Ḥibbat Zion movement in the late 1800s. He was exceedingly active within the general Zionist movement throughout his lifetime, eventually emerging as one of the most talented and prolific promulgators of religious Zionism. Nissenbaum’s writings are religious in nature and content and, in many ways, they correlate with those of R. Meir Simḥah. However, messianic imagery and messages are represented in his works. Many examples of this can be found in Nissenbaum’s “*Ha-Yabadut ha-Leumi*” and still more are collected by Gershon C. Bacon in his “Birth Pangs of the Messiah: The Reflections of Two Polish Rabbis on their Era,” in Frankel, *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*: Volume VII, pp. 86-99.

was a supporter of Ḥibbat Zion from its inception.¹⁰⁶ In 1902, he founded the Mizraḥi movement and became its first spiritual head. His previous intimate exposure notwithstanding, R. Reines emerged as one of the strongest critics of messianic Zionism.¹⁰⁷

Scholars commonly describe R. Reines's Zionist motives and goals as pragmatic. It was the outburst of costly pogroms in 1881-1882 and the rise of European anti-Semitism that inspired R. Reines and likeminded activists to pursue radical solutions. They claimed that the only way to attain and maintain Jewish safety and continuity as a nation was to establish a Jewish-controlled state.¹⁰⁸ This ideology, marked by pragmatism and politicism, eventually became known as "political Zionism."¹⁰⁹

The pragmatic approach of political Zionism allows for the severing of ties between religion and Zionism. Undoubtedly, R. Reines was observant and he was religiously motivated in his Zionist activism. Furthermore, he clearly conceived of a Zionism soundly set on the bedrock of religion.¹¹⁰ However, about the connection between religion and Zionism, R. Reines would say, "this is my personal opinion, which I have not imposed on Mizraḥi."

R. Reines's hesitance to impose his religious views on the party left its religious nature and affiliation hazy. Due to goals decided upon at the initial conference, Mizraḥi did not officially call itself a religious-Zionist party. The bylaws highlighted a "spirit of Orthodoxy" and sympathy to the comfort of observant members, but Mizraḥi welcomed all members and decidedly left any activities unrelated to Zionism off the agenda.¹¹¹ The Mizraḥi movement was essentially neutral regarding the question of the interplay between religion and Zionism.¹¹² Luz notes the constant vacillation between Zionism and religion that accompanied Mizraḥi from its inception. Their failure to formulate a positive religious alternative to anti-Zionist Orthodoxy left them with the "paradoxical position that 'Zionism

¹⁰⁶ Luz, p. 228.

¹⁰⁷ Ravitzky, p. 33 and Luz, p. 236.

¹⁰⁸ See Don-Yehiya, "Messianism and Politics," p. 242; see also Ravitzky, p. 33.

¹⁰⁹ Don-Yehiya, p. 242 and Luz, pp. 234-5, 238.

¹¹⁰ See Luz, p. 247.

¹¹¹ Luz, p. 230.

¹¹² Luz (p. 239) notes that this neutrality even drew criticism from R. Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook who was known to be a more tolerant religious Zionist.

has nothing to do with religion.”¹¹³ Mizrahi, perhaps led by R. Reines’s vagueness or passivity, had thus presented Zionism as its own dogma, essentially detaching it from religion.¹¹⁴

The separation of religion and Torah observance from Zionism—even if only theoretical—is impossible in the thought of R. Meir Simḥah. Throughout his discussions of the Land of Israel and its significance, he repeatedly proclaims that settling the land is a positive commandment.¹¹⁵ This emphasis stresses the inherent connection between settling the Land of Israel and religion and frames it in the context of the will of God. The import of a Jewish nation in a Jewish land is not simply pragmatic. It is a divine imperative that motivates us to settle and build our land. The concepts of Jewish nationhood and a Jewish homeland are inextricably linked with every detail of religion.

And the idea is that the Torah and faith are the foundation of the nation of Israel. And all things holy, including the Land of Israel, Jerusalem, etc., are [but] details and branches of Torah, and they are sanctified with the sanctity of Torah.¹¹⁶

R. Meir Simḥah dispels the notion of a pragmatic approach to Jewish nationhood and a Jewish homeland again, in a letter. A Jew’s love for the Land of Israel is “unlike a Frenchman” who “loves his homeland and its capital, Paris.” The latter’s love is based on “a feeling of nationalism and a love of his birthplace, which is the product of humanness and manners.” Jewish love of Israel, however, “shall not be founded upon nationalist feelings. Rather it is founded upon holy mountains.”¹¹⁷ Love of Zion is a holy love, based not on nationalist sentiment or pragmatic concern, but on total commitment to fulfillment of the will of God. A Mizrahi which could allow for the separation of Zionism and religion was a Mizrahi with which R. Meir Simḥah could not affiliate.

¹¹³ Luz, p. 235-6. See also Luz, p. 293. For more discussion regarding the tension between modernity and tradition which plagued the religious-Zionist movement, see Yosef Salmon, “Tradition and Modernity in Early Religious-Zionist Thought,” *Tradition*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Summer, 1979), pp. 79-98.

¹¹⁴ See Dov Schwartz, *Faith at the Crossroads: A Theological Profile of Religious Zionism* (translated by Batya Stein) (Boston: Brill, 2002), p. 22, for a source in Nissenbaum’s writing to this effect. Schwartz compares this approach to R. Reines’s.

¹¹⁵ See above, note 101.

¹¹⁶ *Mesbeḳh Hokhmah*, *Shemot* 32:19. R. Meir Simḥah repeatedly stresses this point that there is no concept of inherent holiness. The holiness of every item and place is fully dependent on the fulfillment of commands linked to the item or place. See *Mesbeḳh Hokhmah*, *Shemot* 19:13.

¹¹⁷ Letter to Slucki.

R. Reines's conception is problematic to R. Meir Simḥah in another aspect as well. A pragmatic Zionism essentially believes in the founding of a national homeland as a practical solution to a threat to Jewish continuity. Although Zionists certainly did set their sights on Israel as the ideal haven, the realization of their goals was not limited to that destination. Perhaps the most confusing episode in the history of Zionism was the Uganda controversy. Theodore Herzl's novel proposal to consider Jewish settlement in East Africa was presented at the Sixth Zionist Congress in 1903, commencing a bitter dispute within the general Zionist movement.¹¹⁸

One would think that a religious Zionist could never support such a proposal. Is the Land of Israel not the official Jewish homeland designated by God in His Torah? If Zionism "should be based on religion," then is not the religious imperative to settle Eretz Yisrael nonnegotiable? R. Reines's approach to this issue, therefore, is perplexing. On the one hand, we find his unequivocal affirmation of the significance of the Land of Israel as the Jewish land.

A fundamental basis of faith is to believe in the return of the people of Israel to their land. We cannot construe a unique people that will forever be dispersed and scattered among the nations, without a land of their own.¹¹⁹

At the same time, however, R. Reines and contemporary leaders of Mizraḥi supported the Uganda plan.¹²⁰ Mizraḥi's abandonment of the concept of Eretz Yisrael as the only option for the Jewish people is surprising only if we conceive of their party as a Zionist movement based firmly in religious values. If R. Reines and Mizraḥi submit to a Zionism defined as "a pragmatic solution for the sufferings of the Jews in exile," however, it becomes understandable that they would grab the first practical opportunity to emigrate from Europe to another safe country.¹²¹ To R. Reines, Eretz Yisrael was of value, but it was not of exclusive value.¹²²

¹¹⁸ See Chapter 10 of Luz's book for more information on this controversy.

¹¹⁹ R. Reines, *Ohr Hadash al Zion Ta'ir* (translation from Schwartz, *Faith at the Crossroads*, p. 8).

¹²⁰ See Yehiya-Don, p. 242; see also Luz, pp. 258-9.

¹²¹ Yehiya-Don, *ibid.*

¹²² Of course, saving Jewish lives is one of the highest Torah values. In this sense, the Uganda plan certainly had the merit of an attempt at salvation, if not a strictly Zionist one. Herzl's opposition pegged him as a "covert Territorialist," obsessed only with the attainment of an autonomous Jewish homeland (see Luz,

R. Meir Simḥah could never align himself with an organization that could set its sights on any land other than Eretz Yisrael. He describes a longing for the land which is natural to every Jew.

And with this, was set in the soul of his [i.e., Jacob's] sons a natural connection to desire the land of their forefathers and to consider themselves strangers [in any other land].¹²³

Furthermore, abandoning the plan to settle Israel because of practical concerns constitutes a serious lack of faith, according to R. Meir Simḥah. God made it clear to Abraham that nothing would impede Jewish settlement of their land in the right time. No matter the obstacle, God promises that He will conquer the land for His nation.¹²⁴ The theoretical possibility of supporting the settlement of another land not only denies this inner yearning but downplays the intrinsic spiritual significance of Eretz Yisrael and its supremacy over all other lands. R. Meir Simḥah claims that the supreme quality of this land is as old as time itself, assuming that the entire world was created “from the holy land,” and that, in this way, it is “the center of the world.”¹²⁵ While he assumes that holiness does not inhere in the land, as its holiness is dependent upon faith and Torah observance,¹²⁶ R. Meir Simḥah does hold that the Land of Israel is innately primed for holiness. He describes the land as being “designated for [divine] service” already from the times of Abraham.¹²⁷ R. Meir Simḥah attributes a spike in Abraham's level of prophecy to the purging power of dwelling in the Land of Israel.¹²⁸ He maintains that the sanctity and power

p. 257). However, his motives and the motives of his supporters were understandably nuanced and complex. This article neither attempts to defend nor support the plan, only to contrast it with the outlook of R. Meir Simḥah.

¹²³ *Mesbekeh Hokhmah, Va-Yikra* 26:44. See also *Mesbekeh Hokhmah, Devarim* 30:1. See also *Mesbekeh Hokhmah, Devarim* 28:4, where R. Meir Simḥah clarifies that this natural “yearning” is not for physical luxuries. Rather, it seems to be a spiritual yearning. It is anything but pragmatic.

¹²⁴ *Mesbekeh Hokhmah, Bereishit* 15:1.

¹²⁵ *Mesbekeh Hokhmah, Bereishit* 13:14-15.

¹²⁶ *Mesbekeh Hokhmah, Shemot* 12:21. This is one way in which R. Meir Simḥah's conception of *kedushat ha-aretz* differs from earlier commentators. As Avinoam Rosenak notes, medieval thinkers attribute inherent holiness to the Land of Israel which, among other things, obligates a higher level of observance. See Avinoam Rosenak, *Ha-Halakhah ha-Nevu'it (Hotza'at sefarim*. Jerusalem, 2007), pp. 150-3. I hope to elaborate on this in the future.

¹²⁷ *Mesbekeh Hokhmah, Bereishit* 12:1.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 12:7.

of the land exist even when it is controlled by foreign forces.¹²⁹ In many places, R. Meir Simḥah asserts that there is a significantly higher level of divine providence extant in the chosen land as well.

Jerusalem is the place of personal [divine] providence. And that is the meaning of the verse: “God is there” (Ezekiel 48:34). He is there, and His eyes are watching it constantly. For even regarding the [entire] Land of Israel, the verse says: “[the land] which God, your Lord, seeks out constantly” (*Devarim* 11:12). Certainly [it is so, regarding] Jerusalem.¹³⁰

Elsewhere, R. Meir Simḥah clarifies that Israel and Jerusalem are especially guided by personal providence, as opposed to all other lands which are subject to a less direct influence from God.

And that which He will bring them to another land and does not allow them redemption in the land of Egypt; nor does He kill the Egyptians and allow them to inherit the land in their stead... So too, the Nation of Israel is worthy of meriting the treasure [that is] the place of [their source], the place in which they were conceived, and [the place which] is suited for their souls. [It is a place] which is under the providence of God alone...¹³¹

In fact, R. Meir Simḥah argues that the true “body” of the land is entirely spiritual. The land itself is but a physical embodiment of a sanctified, spiritual entity. With this, he explains how Abraham could acquire the land by simply gazing at it.

“For the land which you see, to you I will give it...” Perhaps [we can explain as follows]. The act of gazing [at an object] effects an acquisition [of that object], since the object is not owned by anyone else. And the ownership [of Israel] which the Canaanites, etc., had was only an ownership of the produce [i.e., rights of usage], as Rashi explained in the beginning of *Bereishit*. The spiritual body—the holy land—was never acquired by any person. Therefore, God said that this man [i.e., Abraham] will acquire it by gazing alone...¹³²

R. Meir Simḥah is unequivocal in his claims that the Land of Israel bears metaphysical significance.¹³³ It is inherently primed for sanctity from time immemorial and it offers opportunities for growth to otherwise

¹²⁹ Ibid., 13:14.

¹³⁰ *Meshekh Hokhmah, Shemot* 3:16.

¹³¹ Ibid., *Shemot* 4:3.

¹³² Ibid., 13:15.

¹³³ See also *Meshekh Hokhmah, Devarim* 28:8.

unattainable spiritual heights. Furthermore, Eretz Yisrael and Jerusalem are subject to a uniquely personal divine providence. All these factors make the land exclusively suited for the Jewish nation.

In what serves as almost a direct rebuttal of the Uganda proposal, R. Meir Simḥah writes,

And, if a prophet will tell them to ascend to a different land (i.e., other than the Land of Israel), then he is a false prophet. [He shall be believed] only if he prophesies that they should ascend “to the land which was promised to our forefathers,” as it was with Moses our master.¹³⁴

Escaping the Diaspora to settle the Land of Israel is not a matter of pragmatism for R. Meir Simḥah. It is a biblical imperative to be viewed in the framework of the greater body of the Torah’s laws and ethics, and any compromise on this theological clause is unacceptable.

R. Reines and his conception of Zionism may have been religious, but his philosophies and actions allowed for and resulted in an abandonment of the Land of Israel. R. Meir Simḥah conceives of the Land of Israel as a spiritual, sanctified entity to which the Jewish nation belongs and for which it yearns. Thus, he could never have affiliated with Mizraḥi.

VI. Conclusion and Further Research

R. Meir Simḥah’s political associations have long been ambiguous. Traditionalists and Zionists each claimed him as their own. And both did so with good reason. R. Meir Simḥah embodied many of the values fundamental to these organizations without ever officially joining either.

Here, I utilized relevant pieces in *Meshekh Hokhmah* in systematically noting and analyzing the various reasons that R. Meir Simḥah could not and would not affiliate with any Zionist or anti-Zionist organization. Given his nuanced and uncompromising approach to the issues at hand, association with any given party would have been tantamount to concession of his theological convictions.

Many points foundational to a comprehensive, holistic presentation of R. Meir Simḥah’s approach to the Land of Israel were noted. It is my hope that the door has been opened to even broader research that yields a more pointed, complete analysis. Questions that should be answered by this research include, but are not limited to: Is there any religious-Zionist

¹³⁴ *Meshekh Hokhmah, Bereishit* 50:24.

party with which R. Meir Simḥah could have affiliated? Are there any major traditionalist thinkers—before, after, or contemporaneous with R. Meir Simḥah—who shared significant common ground with him on these issues?¹³⁵ How would R. Meir Simḥah approach the contemporary world of Israeli politics with his nuanced religious and political worldview? One who attempts such research will certainly uncover significant and fascinating understandings of Israel and Zionism’s place in religion as well as a deeper understanding of the uniquely captivating personality that is R. Meir Simḥah ha-Kohen of Dvinsk. ❧

¹³⁵ A comparison to the thought of R. Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik would be of interest. Although R. Soloveitchik eventually joined with Mizraḥi, it was not without much deliberation and inner turmoil, and it was only after being a longtime member of Agudath Israel. Furthermore, it was not the same Mizraḥi that R. Meir Simḥah avoided. One wonders where these two giants in Jewish law and philosophy agreed and disagreed.