

A Coherent Universe of Rabbi Meir Simchah: A Philosophical System Guiding Halachah, Exegesis, and Leadership

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The central inquiry of this study is whether a cohesive, underlying philosophical system can be identified within the works of Rabbi Meir Simchah¹ (RMS)—one consisting of abstract principles that informed his diverse contributions to Halachah, exegesis, communal leadership, and his views on current events that affected his local and national Jewish communities.

It must be considered that, despite his undisputed brilliance, his corpus may not represent a unified theoretical system. Instead, it may reflect

¹ Rabbi Meir Simchah Cohen (RMS) was born in 1843 in Butrimonys (Baltrimantz), Lithuania, then part of the Russian Empire. His scholarly development was remarkably independent; he never attended a regular yeshivah, was never tutored by a prominent *gadol*, and never served as a protégé under someone else's wing. Though he spent three years in the elite *Kollel Prushim* of Eišiškės (Eyshishok) focused on secluded Talmudic study, his rise was entirely self-driven. This intellectual independence is likely the key to his singularity, as his mind was never shaped or restrained by the major institutional influences of his day. In 1860, at age 17, he married Chaya Makovsky and moved to Bialystok. This 26-year foundational period (c. 1860–1887) was defined by intensive study that established his reputation as a preeminent halakhic authority. In 1887, he became the rabbi of the non-chassidic community of Dvinsk. Over the next four decades, until his passing on the 4th of Elul 1926, RMS served as the city's undisputed leader, earning the devotion of the entire Jewish community and the profound respect of the gentile population alike.

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a more pragmatic, *ad hoc* approach, where insights are driven by the specific demands of the subject matter rather than a predetermined set of principles.

To address this question, I propose that two distinct methodological frameworks can be employed to reconstruct the philosophical thought of a thinker like RMS from a corpus that is inherently non-systematic, fragmentary, and exceptionally complex:

1. The Inductive-Accumulative Approach (Bottom-Up): This method proceeds by analyzing individual passages in isolation, treating each segment as an autonomous unit of thought. Only after accumulating a significant critical mass of such specific textual analyses does the researcher attempt to synthesize these disparate details into a coherent framework of general conclusions.
2. The Immersive-Hypothetical Approach (Top-Down): This method relies on holistic immersion in the author's entire body of work. It mandates a prolonged period of study to internalize the internal logic of the thinker's worldview before any formal theorizing takes place. Only after this extensive gestation are general hypotheses formulated. These hypotheses are then subjected to a process of validation or refutation through a systematic return to specific textual evidence.

In my own investigation of R. Meir Simchah's thought, I have adopted the second of these frameworks. This choice does not suggest that the top-down method is inherently superior to the inductive one; rather, it reflects the specific nature of my long-term engagement with the text.

The analysis that follows represents an initial attempt in this direction. As this is a first foray into identifying an overarching system within such a complex corpus, it should be regarded as a work in progress rather than a definitive conclusion. I remain mindful that further study may yield new insights that could refine or even challenge these initial hypotheses. Ultimately, it remains for the reader to judge whether this methodology successfully illuminates the internal logic of RMS's thought or if the evidence points toward a more pragmatic, case-specific reality.

The Foundations of Human Agency: From Maimonidean Intellect to RMS's Free Will

A logical starting point for identifying the abstract principles of RMS is his interpretation of the "Divine Image" (*Tzelem Elokim*), a concept that

serves as the cornerstone of his philosophical anthropology. To understand his unique contribution, one must first look at the classical formulation provided by Maimonides.

In *The Guide for the Perplexed* (Part 1, Chapter 1), Maimonides distinguishes between the terms *to'ar* (physical form), *tzelem* (specific form/essence), and *d'mut* (resemblance) to strip the Divine of any anthropomorphic attributes. For Maimonides, *Tzelem Elokim* does not denote a physical likeness but refers exclusively to the human intellect and the capacity for intellectual perception.

RMS broadens this definition by incorporating the dimension of uncompelled free choice—an element that is not inherently derived from Maimonides' own formulation of the term. Critically, RMS remains firmly within the Maimonidean framework: he understands that the capacity for free will is not independent of the intellect but rather necessitated by it. For RMS, the Divine Image is the intellect precisely because it is the faculty that enables man to transcend instinct and exercise sovereign choice.

In *Meshech Chochmah* (Genesis 1:26), he redefines the Divine Image through the lens of absolute agency:

The Divine Image is free choice without a compelling nature, solely through free will and intellect... We only know this: that free choice is from the *tzimtzum*² (contraction) of the Divine, whereby the Holy One, blessed be He, leaves room for His creatures to act as they choose, and has removed predestination and absolute decree from their specific actions. Therefore it is said, "Let us make man in Our image," meaning that the Torah speaks in human language: He said, "We will leave room for human choice so that he will not be compelled in his actions or obligated in his thoughts," and he will have free choice to do good or evil as his soul desires, and be able to do

² The use of the term *tzimtzum* (contraction/withdrawal) by RMS should not be interpreted in a mystical or Kabbalistic sense. Formally, *Meshech Chochmah* is a commentary on the Pentateuch that adheres to the traditional interpretive methods of *psbat* (literal), *drash* (homiletic), and *remez* (allusive), while notably omitting *sod* (mysticism). In this context, RMS employs *tzimtzum* as a philosophical category to address the classic paradox between Divine foreknowledge (*yedi'ah*) and human free will (*bechirah*). He understands that human intellect is akin to a "narrow blanket": if one utilizes logic to fully "cover" (explain) the mechanics of free will, God's absolute knowledge is left "uncovered" (exposed to contradiction). Conversely, if one pulls the logic to fully secure the concept of God's knowledge, free will is left "uncovered" and appears impossible. RMS concludes that while these two "rivals" coexist perfectly within the Divine essence, they will always remain in a state of irresolvable tension within the limitations of the human mind.

things against his natural temperament and against what is otherwise right in his eyes.

This principle of radical choice is further reinforced by RMS's keen sensitivity to the linguistic nuances of the creation narrative. Regarding Genesis 1:31, *Meshech Chochmah* observes a subtle omission at the conclusion of the six days of Creation. While the text repeatedly states that God "saw" individual elements of Creation and declared them good, this declaration is notably absent regarding man at the moment of his creation. RMS interprets this silence as a fundamental proof of free will. Because man is a dynamic being whose nature is not fixed at birth, his ultimate "goodness" cannot be determined by Divine "seeing" (knowledge) at the outset. As he explains: "But man is not governed by his nature, only by his choice; and since his choice is subject to change, the [Divine] 'seeing' does not compel it."

RMS identifies this same principle in God's relationship with Abraham. Regarding Genesis 18:19, he explains that Divine foreknowledge does not translate into a deterministic force:

"For I have known him, so that he may command..." Indeed, the knowledge of the Almighty, may He be blessed, does not compel choice... Therefore, the verse specifies "His knowledge"—meaning that it remains with Him as knowledge, without becoming a decree that compels [Abraham's] choice. This allows him "to command" through his own choice and by his own will.

By shifting the definition of the Divine Image from pure intellect to the capacity for uncompelled choice, RMS establishes a primary principle that may serve as the foundation for his broader system—one that emphasizes human responsibility.

The Functional Prerequisites of Free Will: Rationality and *Darchei Noam*

In the thought of RMS, the existence of free will creates a logical mandate for human responsibility. However, this responsibility is contingent upon two foundational requirements: Intellectual Rationality and the principle of *Darchei Noam* (Pleasant Ways). From a purely logical standpoint, RMS argues that God's expectation for man to choose correctly is only valid if man possesses the necessary cognitive tools. Without Rationality to distinguish truth from imagination, and without the ethical framework of *Darchei Noam* to ensure the Torah is applicable to human life, the system of choice would be fundamentally flawed.

To understand the first of these requirements—the logical necessity of rationality—we turn to a profound philosophical exposition in *Meshech Chochmah* on Exodus 12:21:³

It is evident that all feelings are rooted in nature [tangible things], and in the perceptible world which stirs the human heart—such as love, beauty, and valor. The ancient nations sanctified all the forces of nature through their feelings toward them; they adored them and named them as deities: the god of beauty, the god of valor, and the god of love, as is well known. Furthermore, anyone who excelled in these traits was sanctified and called a “son of god.” To this day, the nations depict images and sanctify the tangible... Thus, feelings bolster their faith, which is built upon the perceptible and the depicted. This is not the case with God! For Abraham arose and contemplated that [the Creator] is not a part of created beings, nor a force within matter; He can neither be described, depicted, nor grasped. For were He described or depicted, He would be defined by something and would have an end [limit]; and anything that has an end must have a beginning. He is the Necessary Being (*Mechuyav HaMetziut*), the Bringer-forth of all existence from absolute nothingness, beyond all mere possibilities. He is a Unity unlike any other; for were there more than one, they would be distinguished from each other by some aspect and would thus be limited, one bounded by the other. Indeed, the entirety of existence is infinitely removed from the one Blessed Creator. This is a matter of true and intellectual contemplation, yet who can grasp it? To the extent that Rabbeinu Bachya wrote: “None truly worships Him except for the philosopher or the prophet.” Nevertheless, all of Israel truly believe in His existence and His Unity—a purely intellectual concept—and they scoff at all the feelings and impressions felt through nature, understanding that these are all transient and perishable, merely contingent beings (*Efshari HaMetziut*).

This foundational passage clearly illustrates RMS’s rationalist and anti-mystical approach. It serves as a concise synthesis of Maimonides’ *Eight Chapters*, effectively internalizing the Rambam’s theological framework: belief in a transcendent God and the absolute negation of Divine attributes.

³ Rather than presenting RMS’s exposition in one long narration, I have divided the text into thematic fragments for didactic clarity. Although this disrupts the original narrative flow—for which I ask the reader’s indulgence—it allows for a more focused analysis of the principles embedded in each stage.

Regarding this, the Sages explained: “Why did Israel merit to recite the Shema? Because they are the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”—meaning they understand such a philosophical matter and scoff at mere feelings. Therefore, as it were, in His wisdom, God desired that all of Israel exert themselves in intellectual contemplation to believe in His Unity, so that feelings and tangibility would neither harm nor hinder their intellectual perception.

According to RMS, the recitation of the Shema represents an “intellectual and philosophical” concept embedded in the declaration “Hashem is One.” This is not a mere numerical value, but a subject requiring immense conceptual and theological depth. The goal, as the rabbi articulates, is to ensure that “misleading emotions neither impair nor damage intellectual clarity.” Instead, one should reach a state where one “scoffs at the impulses and excitements triggered by the natural world.”

What, then, did He do to counteract the paths of deception stemming from the imaginative and misleading faculties? He gave them an abundance of Torah—numerous intellectual concepts in both the Written and Oral Law—to strengthen the faculty of the intellect to remain steadfast and prevail over the imagination (*Koach HaMedameh*) and the misleading feelings that cause one to be moved by nature, forget the Creator of the Beginning, and give honor to created beings. He gave them a multitude of commandments to channel these feelings. For example, Love: expressed through love of friends, family life, and love of the nation; Vengeance: to be avenged of the enemies of God; Kindness: to act benevolently toward one’s fellow. All feelings find their place within the commandments. Beauty: expressed in the “fruit of the majestic tree” (*etrog*), yet only for a time, and after the festival, it is discarded—and so forth...

RMS is arguing that the mitzvos are essentially a “training program” for the intellect to overcome the “feelings” (emotions/imagination) that lead to idolatry. This perfectly supports the notion that Rationality is the prerequisite for using Free Will correctly.

Notably, RMS recontextualizes specific commandments—such as “loving your neighbor,” taking vengeance against God’s enemies, and performing acts of kindness—by shifting them from the realm of emotion to the realm of the intellect (*מושכל*). He purposefully includes the love of family and the nation in this category. These mitzvos do not arise from innate human feelings, nor are they intended to satisfy emotional needs; rather, people are obligated to train and habituate themselves to fulfill them as intellectual imperatives. It follows from this logic that one is commanded to love one’s fellow even if they are corrupt or have cast off the

yoke of Torah, as the obligation is a function of the intellect rather than a response to the individual's character.

RMS then explains the statement of R. Chananyah ben Akashya: "The Holy One, blessed be He, desired *l'zakos* (to merit/purify) Israel." The meaning of *l'zakos* here is "to cleanse"—that is, the purpose was not merely to give them rewards, but to purify them and establish them upon the philosophical religion, so they would not be enticed by perceptible depictions:

He gave them an abundance of "Torah"—meaning intellectual concepts, "and commandments"—meaning taking all perceptible things and feelings and directing them toward commandments and good deeds so they do not entice man toward evil.

Therefore, [the High Priest] wore the *Tzitzit* on his head, upon which was written "Holy to the Lord"—signifying that the intellect is entirely holy. However, upon the heart—the source of feelings—was written [on the Breastplate] "The Children of Israel," to teach that feelings should be directed toward the commandments, most of which concern the unity of the nation... Thus, the emotions are occupied with the commandments and are not enticed by nature to adore that which excites the heart and stirs it toward idolatry. And because all of Israel crown the "King" over themselves, the "head" is the faculty of the intellect which perceives His Blessed existence... For this is true freedom: when the intellect rules over the emotions.

Ultimately, the passage in its totality demonstrates that RMS views free will as inextricably linked to this intellectual mastery over one's passions. The ability to choose based on rational imperative, despite emotional resistance, actualizes his concluding principle: 'For this is true freedom: when the intellect rules over the emotions.'

In *Meshech Chochmah* (Genesis 18:27), RMS offers a compelling analysis of the concept of ritual impurity (*tumah*), which aligns with his anti-mystical approach:

We find that primary elements do not contract impurity; all that grows from the earth and water attached to the ground [are immune], except for that whose completion is achieved through human action and circumstances—only in these may impurity occur. For impurity does not reside in any created thing [in its natural state], as each is compelled by its function and its non-volitional nature. Rather, impurity arises from the conflict of [man's] powers and his will, which compel him toward the path he chooses... [That is to say, the impact of the evil choice made by a volitional human being is what causes impurity, even in inanimate objects which, in the natural state

wherein God created them, cannot contract impurity]. Therefore, when the Divine mystery and His wisdom set Israel apart, warning them regarding the purity of one's being and distancing them from things that defile the self, He decreed impurity only upon things that are closely associated with human needs—for man is the cause of their impurity... and anyone possessing greater perfection is more susceptible to impurity. As the Sages said: according to the Torah, idolaters do not contract impurity, because they lack [this level of] perfection; therefore, they are almost akin to nature and its elements, which lack free will.

The fundamental dichotomy RMS presents is between “nature” and “freedom” (autonomy). Impurity does not adhere to the natural elements, nor is it an independent metaphysical entity. Rather, impurity is the direct expression of resistance to the exercise of free will.⁴ The designation of “impure things” specifically refers to those elements or actions which fundamentally negate a person's ability to engage rational choice and operate with intellectual autonomy.

This analysis of impurity leads directly to the core of RMS's anti-mystical worldview: his revolutionary definition of holiness (*kedushah*). For RMS, there is no such thing as intrinsic holiness within the created world; God alone is inherently holy. Any holiness found in people, objects, or places—be it the Temple, the Tablets of the Law, or even the Land of Israel—is merely a functional status bestowed by human adherence to the Divine will.

Here are RMS's words regarding the verse “When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they may go up the mountain” (Exodus 19:13):

There is no intrinsic holiness in any created thing; it belongs only to the Creator, blessed be He. Do not imagine that the mountain itself is a holy entity and that God revealed Himself upon it because of its own [sanctity]. Not so, Children of Israel! For “when the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they may go up the mountain,” and it [returns to being] a dwelling place for wild beasts and cattle. It is holy only so long as the Divine Presence (Shechinah) rests upon it, by virtue of the sanctity of the Creator, blessed be His name. For it is not the place that honors the person, but the person who honors his place—and this is a noble idea... The same applies to the Temple: one should not imagine that the building itself possesses inherent holiness. For this reason, those who are ritually impure are permitted to touch it from the outside... to show that you must fear only the One Who

⁴ See Avi Sagi, *Judaism: Between Religion and Morality* (HaKibbutz HaMeuchad Publishing, 1998), p. 171.

caused His Name to dwell within this House; it is holy within, but not behind [outside] it.

In addressing the moment Moses descends the mountain, witnesses the people worshipping the Golden Calf, and shatters the Tablets, RMS offers a sharp analysis in *Meshech Chochmah* on Exodus 32:19. The rabbi explains:

All forms of holiness—the Land of Israel, Jerusalem, the Temple, and so forth—are merely derivations and branches of the Torah, and they are sanctified by the holiness of the Torah. Therefore, there is no differentiation in any matters of Torah between place and time, and it is the same in Eretz Yisrael and outside it [aside from commandments specific to the Land]. Do not imagine that the Temple and the Tabernacle are holy entities in themselves, God forbid! The Blessed Name dwells among His children, and if they violate His covenant, all holiness is removed from the Tabernacle and the Temple, and they become like mundane vessels, for their sanctity has been removed. Furthermore, even the Tablets—“the writing of God”—are not intrinsically holy; they are holy only because you [Israel] observe them. When a bride commits adultery beneath her wedding canopy, [the tablets] are considered like earthenware vessels and possess no inherent holiness... The final word is that there is no holy entity in the world; only the Blessed Name is holy, and to Him alone are praise and service fitting. All other holiness exists solely by virtue of the commandment the Creator gave to build a Tabernacle and to offer sacrifices for the sake of the Blessed Name... For there is no intrinsic holiness in any created thing, only that which results from Israel’s observance of the Torah in accordance with the will of the Creator, blessed be He, alone... Regarding the Tablets, [He] showed them how to uproot all false imaginings from their minds. Moses our teacher acted wondrously when he shattered the Tablets... demonstrating that the first Tablets, which were God’s handiwork—were broken, while the tablets that Moses carved—were the complete ones! This was to show that there is no intrinsic holiness in any created being, only that which comes from Israel’s observance of the Torah according to the will of the Creator, blessed be He.

RMS’s approach differs fundamentally from thinkers such as Judah HaLevi, the Maharal, the Kabbalists, and Abraham Isaac Kook, who view holiness as an ontological reality inherent in the object itself. To them, certain places or objects possess an essential sanctity that exists independently of human conduct. In contrast, RMS views holiness as something legalistic—that is, halachic. This legalistic approach asserts that

there is no holiness in objects, whatever they may be. Ontologically, only the Holy One, Blessed be He, is holy.

Having established that human agency is contingent upon the rational governance of the intellect over the emotions, it follows that the Torah must be given in a way that respects the limits of human nature. This leads to a second pillar of RMS's thought: the principle of *Darchei Noam*. For RMS, this is not merely a call for kindness, but a rational requirement that the Law must align with human nature and psychology. The concept is explicitly stated in *Meshech Chochmah*, Leviticus 18:2–5:

In a rational sense, the intention of this passage is that the Torah did not command decrees that would be difficult for the union of the body and soul to fulfill as universal laws—for citizen and stranger, for layman and priest alike. Rather, [it commanded] matters that are inherently designed to guide the physical temperament (*Mezegeg*) in a balanced and equitable manner, such that no natural instinct is suppressed... This is the meaning of the statement that “the Creator made man upright,” such that his [natural] components harmonize with the components of the Torah... The Torah did not prescribe total abstinence from food beyond what the human temperament can endure, nor did it withhold sexual relations beyond what is appropriate for the preservation of the species and the balance of the body... Therefore, do not imagine that it is difficult to fulfill, or that it is impossible for the nature of the body to sustain this path. To this end, He said to them, “I am the Lord your God”—for I am your Creator, and I know your nature and the foundations of your psychological makeup (*Mezegeg Nafsbechem*)... “You shall keep My statutes and My ordinances, which a person shall do and live by them”—meaning that they shall serve as the vitality of the human soul, guiding it in a way that is good for him in this world and fortunate is his portion in the World to Come—they are not matters that bring death.

RMS translates the aforementioned principle into a practical norm in *Meshech Chochmah* (Genesis 9:7), explicitly identifying it as “*Darchei Noam*”:

It is not far-fetched to say that the reason the Torah exempted women from the commandment of procreation (*peru u'revu*) and obligated only men, is because “the judgments of Hashem and His ways are ways of pleasantness (*Darchei Noam*), and all her paths are peace.” The Torah did not impose upon an Israelite anything that the physical body is unable to endure... For this reason, we find no commandment to fast except for one day a year, and even then, first we are obligated to eat [beforehand]... And we find how this [principle]

served as a cornerstone for the Sages of the Tradition, who exempted [a woman] from Levirate marriage (*Yibbum*) if she had children who subsequently died, based on the principle of “*Darchei Noam*.” If so, regarding women—for whom pregnancy and childbirth are fraught with complications and danger—the Torah did not decree a command to be fruitful and multiply. Furthermore, [a woman] is permitted to drink a contraceptive potion... One might further suggest that the reason the Torah exempted women from procreation is that [God] truly embedded the instinct of desire within nature... Therefore, the core of the commandment [is for the man], as taught in *Yevamos* 61b: “A man shall not desist from procreation unless he has children.” If he married a woman and she did not give birth, he is obligated to take another woman who can have children. It is not the way of the Torah to restrain nature... Consequently, to decree upon a woman that if she marries a man and he cannot father children, she must [be forced to] leave her beloved and take another man—this would be contrary to nature, [requiring one] to love the hated and hate the beloved. And only the man, who [legally] has the capacity to take an additional wife, was tasked with the obligation by the Torah.

This citation demonstrates that this conception did not remain purely theoretical; it actively shaped his practical Halachic rulings. While further Halachic examples will be provided later, I will first present several compelling instances where this principle is translated into a tool for Biblical interpretation—often in a captivating and highly unexpected manner:

Leviticus 6:18 states: “This is the law of the sin-offering: in the place where the burnt-offering is slaughtered shall the sin-offering be slaughtered...” The commentators ask why the text did not simply state: “The sin-offering shall be slaughtered on the north side of the Altar.” Why did the Torah see fit to define the location of the sin-offering based on the location of the burnt-offering? *Meshech Chochmah* explains:

The Omnipresent had compassion for transgressors; therefore, He wrote that in the place where they slaughter the burnt-offering, they shall slaughter the sin-offering—so that onlookers might assume [the person] is bringing a burnt-offering.

Here, the principle of human dignity acts as the governing axiom that dictates the specific, subtle wording of the Written Torah itself, prioritizing human psychology within the Divine text.

Genesis 17:9 states: “And as for you, you shall keep My covenant [the Covenant of Circumcision]... throughout their generations (*l’dorosam*).” In the Hebrew text, the word *dorosam* is written in a deficient form (חסר),

missing the letter *vav*. RMS (in *Meshech Chochmah*) finds here an allusion to the generation of the desert, who did not perform circumcision because the northern wind did not blow (*Yevamos* 72a); without that wind, performing the commandment of circumcision would have involved mortal danger—*derachehab darchei noam*.

Exodus 6:13 notes that God commanded both the Israelites and Pharaoh “to bring the children of Israel out of Egypt.” *Meshech Chochmah* questions why the Israelites themselves needed such a command. Citing the Midrash (*Numbers Rabbah* 13:8), he explains that certain members of the tribes of Reuben, Simeon, and Levi actually held positions of authority in Egypt, even enslaving their own brethren who had been sold into servitude by Pharaoh’s government. Thus, the Divine command was directed at these Israelite overseers to cease their exploitation. RMS further explores why these specific tribes were spared the crushing labor. He suggests that because Jacob had distanced these three sons in his final blessings, they were psychologically vulnerable; had they been subjected to the full weight of Egyptian bondage, they likely would have assimilated entirely, believing they had no future within the nation of Israel. To prevent this, Divine Providence ensured they remained free of the harshest servitude.

This is a stunning example of the *Darchei Noam* principle. God withheld the decree of full servitude from these three tribes because they could not have endured it. The following citation is equally striking in its application of this logic. Rather than viewing the desert period merely as a punitive measure, RMS interprets it as a manifestation of *Darchei Noam*—a necessary “transitional period” designed to align with the slow, natural evolution of human character. One could not reasonably expect a people emerging from the depths of Egyptian idolatry to enter the Land of Israel and immediately fulfill the entire Torah. In his commentary on Deuteronomy 29:3, RMS explains that the forty-year period of miraculous governance in the wilderness was a pedagogical necessity. It was designed to instill the foundations of faith and to teach the people the Torah’s intricacies over those forty years. This period served as the essential foundation, creating a lasting intellectual and theological infrastructure for the “nation’s conduct to this very day, ensuring that the word of God would never depart from them.” This educational delay is a profound expression of *Darchei Noam*—the principle that the Torah’s ways are attuned to human capacity. It reflects Maimonides’ famous psychological axiom that “it is impossible to transition from one extreme to its opposite instantaneously.” Just as a person cannot abruptly abandon a lifetime of habit, a nation cannot be forced into a sudden conceptual transformation. By providing a transitional generation in the desert, Divine Providence en-

sured that the Torah was granted in a manner consistent with human nature, allowing the people to be intellectually equipped for their mission rather than overwhelmed by a sudden transformation for which they were psychologically unprepared.

I will now present two examples⁵ of how RMS translates this principle into a practical-halachic language. In *Ohr Samei'ach* (*Laws of Mourning* 3:8), he explains the rationale behind the permission for an ordinary priest (*Kohen Hediot*) to become impure (*tamei*) for his deceased brother:

Because a person's soul is embittered [in times of grief], and if he is not permitted to become impure and occupy himself with the burial of his relatives, there is no greater anguish (*agmas nefesh*) than this. Therefore, the Torah did not place a fence (*lo gadra*) for the ordinary priest that would oppose the natural [disposition] of the human psyche.

Ohr Samei'ach, Laws of the Murderer and the Preservation of Life 2:4:

Regarding that which we have learned—that even if the entire nation requires his salvation, such as [a leader like] Joab ben Tzeruyah, he [the inadvertent killer] may never leave [the City of Refuge]—we raised the following difficulty: Why should the king or the High Court not enact a special regulation (*takanah*) stating that no man shall kill him, and if someone does kill him, that person shall be executed? It must be said: Since the Torah stated that human nature is revealed to the Creator of all. [God knows] that when [the killer] is not confined within his refuge, the heart of the [blood] avenger will grow hot (*yecham levavo*) and he will strike him. Therefore, the avenger is not subject to the death penalty for striking him... Furthermore, it is not within the power of a king or the High Court of Israel to oppose human nature and its passions [lit. “warmth/heat”].⁶

This last citation proves that for RMS, even the highest legal authorities (the king and the Sanhedrin) are bound by the reality of human psychology. Law cannot legislate away a biological/emotional reality like the heat of the heart of the blood avenger (*go'el badam*).

The evidence provided suggests that for RMS, *Darbei Noam* is far more than a mere interpretive technique; it functions as a primary meta-

⁵ See additional examples in Itzhak Cohen, *Ohr Sameach: Halakhab and Law* (Univ. of Ben Gurion publishing, 2013), pp. 261–270.

⁶ RMS addresses this specific law in four different instances across his works. See an extensive discussion in Itzhak Cohen, *Ohr Sameach: Halakhab and Law*, Gate Five, Chapter One, Section Three.

halachic principle.⁷ This definition shifts the focus to the internal mechanics of the system, identifying the underlying logic that informs—and occasionally limits—the application of formal Halachah. As a “legal lens” and a “compatibility filter,” *Darhei Noam* mandates that the Law be read as an inherently livable system. Consequently, RMS argues that both Divine and rabbinic authority must ensure that Halachah never imposes demands upon mankind that are irreconcilable with human nature.

The Rationality of History: Between Agency and Providence

Having analyzed *Darhei Noam* as a meta-halachic norm governing specific laws, we now examine how RMS elevates this principle into a philosophy of history. For RMS, the Diaspora is not a chaotic series of persecutions, nor is it a sequence governed by metaphysical miracles or inexplicable disasters. Instead, he frames these events as systemic consequences within a rational, cyclical system governed by the self-regulating laws of sociology and the inherent limits of human nature. To understand this framework, we must look to RMS’s own exposition as it appears in *Mesbech Chochmah, Bechukosai*, Leviticus 26:44⁸:

Behold the way of Divine Providence: that they [the Jewish people] will rest for a period of years, close to one hundred or two hundred, and after this a stormy wind will arise, and the multitude of its waves will disperse, it consumes and destroys, ruins and washes away without mercy, until they are scattered, through the lands, run, and flee to a distant place. There they will unite, become a nation, their Torah will grow great, their wisdom will flourish, until one forgets that he is a stranger in a foreign land. He will think that this is his place of origin, without anticipating the spiritual salvation of God at the appointed time. There, an even stronger stormy wind shall come, reminding him with a thundering voice: You are a Jew! And who made you a man? Go forth to a land you do not know!

⁷ I am employing the definition formulated by Eliezer Goldman: “Meta-halakhic norms refer to norms that are not behavioral rules (norms of conduct), but rather norms or principles for the interpretation and application of the Halakhah. That is to say, the object of these principles is not the [external] reality upon which they are applied, but rather the Halakhah itself, which must be understood according to them.” See Eliezer Goldman, *Expositions and Inquiries: Jewish Thought in Past and Present* (Magnes Press, 1996), p. 13.

⁸ The text has been divided into thematic segments for greater analytical clarity.

RMS identifies a cyclical pattern in Jewish Diaspora history driven by socio-political mechanisms rather than random chance or metaphysical/theological factors. This cycle alternates between periods of stability and violent upheaval through four distinct stages: migration → recovery → flourishing → uprooting.⁹ Refugees arrive in a new land with nothing, forced to rely on communal solidarity and religious institutions for survival (migration); through focused effort, the community establishes a firm material and spiritual foundation (recovery); the community enters a “golden age” of prosperity and influence. This success fosters a deep sense of belonging, leading Jews to adopt the host culture and view the land as their permanent home (flourishing); just as integration peaks and origins are forgotten, a resurgence of antisemitism triggers a violent collapse, resulting in pogroms, and expulsion (uprooting), eventually returning to the first stage.

For when Israel finds rest among the nations, it flourishes, and its Torah and analytical sharpness grow, and its children achieve success. [Then], they organize themselves in factions (*yisgodedu*) and rebel against their fathers, for such is the human desire—that the later [generation] should innovate and add strength to that which was hidden from the older generation. This is [true] regarding human wisdom, the source of which is the quarry of human intellect; and experience [proves] that in this, the later ones will form their own paths and increase their strength, as we see with our own eyes in every generation.

At the peak of the flourishing stage, as Torah scholarship reaches new heights, the younger generation naturally seeks to rebel against the old, driven by a desire for innovation and new horizons. Next in the exposition, RMS explains that this normal socio-psychological phenomenon did not pose a threat while the Jewish people resided in their own land:

⁹ A dialectical view of general and Jewish history lies at the heart of Rabbi Nachman Krochmal’s (Ranak) philosophy. In his work *Guide for the Perplexed of the Time*, Krochmal posits that every nation undergoes three stages: growth → strength and achievement (*oz u’mifal*) → rupture and destruction. However, he argues that the Jewish people are eternal due to their unique spiritual essence. I could not find evidence that RMS was familiar with Krochmal’s work. For a comparison of RMS’s cyclical pattern of Jewish history with Ranak’s views of Jewish history, see Yonah Ben-Sasson, *Jewish Thought Through the Ages* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Culture, 1994), 498, 527 [Hebrew]. Ben-Sasson notes that while Ranak views historical cyclicity as an immanent law of human nature, RMS perceives it as a condition specific to the Diaspora.

They could find an outlet to distinguish themselves by improving the nation, each according to his own generation. The High Court (*Beis Din HaGadol*) possessed the authority to overturn the rulings of a previous court; and regarding laws derived through the thirteen principles of hermeneutics, even a lesser court could direct the path as they saw fit...

When Israel dwelt upon its land, there was an appropriate outlet for intergenerational tension to be channeled into positive Torah avenues. The younger generation's desire to innovate and contribute their own insights found legitimate expression within a flexible legal framework that allowed a later High Court to diverge from its predecessor and implement new reforms through legal tools. Consequently, the "intergenerational rebellion" was averted. The situation changed in the Diaspora:

Not so in the Diaspora, where the gathering and assembly for Torah study have diminished; for this reason, no court has the authority to innovate anything... and an iron wall separates Israel from their Father in Heaven. Such has been the way of the nation: when they enter a foreign land, they are not initially men of Torah, having been impoverished by troubles, decrees, and expulsions. Afterward, a Divine spirit awakens within them, yearning to return them to their original source, the quarry of their holiness. They study, disseminate Torah, and achieve wonders, until the horn of Torah stands at its zenith. Is it not true that the [current] generation lacks the power to add anything or to find distinction from their fathers? What, then, shall become of the human desire to excel and innovate? It will turn to critically examine false ideas; it will devise novelties while forgetting what happened to its nation as it tossed in the sea of tribulations—and come what may. Soon it will go so far as to say, "Our fathers inherited falsehood," and the Israelite in general will forget his origins and consider himself a native-born citizen. He will abandon the studies of his religion to learn languages not his own, [and as is the way of men] "they are more prone to learn from corrupted ways than from the proper path." He will come to think that Berlin is Jerusalem... Then, a sweeping wind and tempest will come; it will uproot him from his stock and place him among a distant nation whose language he has not learned. He will then know that he is a stranger—that his [true] language is our Holy Tongue, and that foreign languages are like a passing garment—and that his origins lie in the stock of Israel. In his wandering, he will forget his Torah, its depth, and its dialectics. There he will rest a little, a holy emotion will awaken [within him], and his children will gain strength. His young men will achieve success in the Torah of Hashem and will strive to

spread Torah in this [new] territory, where it had already been forgotten—and through this, [the nation] will endure and grow strong.¹⁰

RMS argues that a critical existential danger arises in the Diaspora due to religious stagnation; because “no court has the authority to innovate,” the natural creative drive of the youth is stifled within the traditional framework of Halachah. This frustrated instinct for innovation compels the younger generation to seek new horizons, leading them to embrace radical ideas and ideals that deviate from the established religious framework. The creative energy of the younger generation becomes destructive and is turned against tradition. The real prospect for a total assimilation into the host culture—“He will come to think that Berlin is Jerusalem”—ultimately leads to the uprooting stage. But then the cycle starts again with the nation eventually recovering and experiencing a Torah resurgence in the new land.

When the Jewish people abuse their free agency to the point of full assimilation, they are essentially attempting to negate their unique national identity; God’s intervention is an act of *Darchei Noam* leadership in action—a rational corrective that prevents total assimilation by forcing the nation into a new stage of migration which resets the social clock, providing a new “frontier” for that creative energy to build Jewish life anew.

RMS is keenly aware that there is a tension between human free agency and Divine governance—a conflict for which there is no simple resolution. We are doomed to live with it. This is how I understand the introductory paragraph of his cyclical history exposition:

The matter is, that we should contemplate **a little** the ways of Divine Providence—**only a little** [as much] as one is able to understand. And this [is] because when the Supreme Wisdom decreed that Israel should wander through the lands for many, many years, until the time Divine purpose instituted as law... It devised means and tricks so that Israel would endure as a nation and not assimilate among the peoples.

There is an atmosphere of wonderment and hesitation, a real tension without a clear solution that RMS profoundly grasps. For him, the tension between the evidence of the “Divine hand” in history and the cognitive reality of a “totally free human agency” is an irresolvable dialectic. There

¹⁰ Certain secondary sources refer to this unique passage in *Meshech Chochmah* as “The *Meshech Chochmah* prophecy of the Holocaust”—but it is not so! The theme is the cyclical nature of Jewish history in the Diaspora in general, rather than any specific event. The reference to “Berlin” is not specifically to the German capital, but rather to Western culture as a whole. If there is any “prophecy” here, it is that in the New World (America), there will be a Torah resurgence.

is no attempt in his writings to synthesize these two forces into a comfortable harmony; rather, he posits that they exist in a state of permanent structural friction within the cyclical history of the Diaspora.

This tension can be illustrated by the metaphor of the “Narrow Blanket”: If you pull the blanket toward Human Agency (the desire for self-expression, the “innovation crisis,” or a desire for a “home” in the Diaspora and local cultural integration), the Divine Plan is exposed; if you pull toward Divine Governance (national distinctiveness, preservation, and continuity), human freedom is smothered.

This outlook extends to a critique of the religious leadership of RMS’s own time,¹¹ whom he viewed as failing to address the natural needs of the generation or uphold the principle of *Darchei Noam*. In his commentary on Numbers 20:11, RMS posits that a true leader must weigh not only the correctness of an action but its public perception. He suggests that even Moses—the pinnacle of *daas Torah*—erred by failing to realize how his “fine policy” at the rock would be misinterpreted by the people.

Ultimately, this philosophy frames migration as an inherent necessity of the Jewish life cycle. Through this exposition, RMS bridges a conceptual gap unmatched by other rabbinic authorities of his time: he provides both a historical rationale for Jewish migration to the New World and a brilliant psychological explanation for why the youth of his era were drawn toward assimilation and radicalism.

Communal Practice as Realization of Meta-Principles

RMS’s pragmatic and empathetic stance toward emigration was a direct application of his rationalist meta-history. While many of his leading rabbinic contemporaries vehemently opposed migration to the “New World,” labeling America a “*treife medinah*” due to its lack of religious infrastructure and the danger of abandonment of the faith, RMS viewed these migrations through the lens of a cyclical Diaspora history. He viewed migration not as a danger, but as potential betterment of the physical well-being of his fellow Jews, and an opportunity to create a new fron-

¹¹ I base this observation on RMS’s linguistic shift in the passage above: throughout the exposition, he uses the general terms *b’chol dor* or *l’fi doro* (in every generation/according to its generation). However, when he poses the acute question—the only question in this text—regarding how a young person should fulfill their need for novelty, he shifts to *hador* (the generation). This specific use of the definite article suggests he is addressing his own contemporaries. He develops this further in *Mesbech Chochmah* on Numbers 20:11, where he explicitly critiques leadership for failing to perceive the specific needs of the people.

tier for creative Jewish life. For example, when a significant number (hundreds) of Jews from Dvinsk immigrated to South Africa, RMS did not sever ties or condemn their departure. Rather, he maintained a warm and active correspondence, providing halachic guidance and encouraging them to channel their “creative energy” into building a new religious infrastructure. This pragmatic and lenient view toward immigration likely extended to the Uganda Proposal. Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines and the Miz-rachi movement famously supported the proposal as a “night asylum” to save Jewish lives. Despite their friendly relationship, there is no documented evidence that RMS ever discussed the Uganda Proposal with Reines, or in any other context.¹² It is highly unlikely that RMS would have viewed Uganda any differently than South Africa. For RMS, migration was not an abandonment of the faith, but a necessary new stage in the survival of the nation, requiring a Rabbinat that served the people wherever they were forced to reset their lives.

Prior to the Balfour Declaration, RMS viewed organized mass immigration to Eretz Yisrael as a violation of the “Three Oaths,”¹³ yet he did

¹² In his article, “A Light Unto Our Nation: R. Meir Simḥah of Dvinsk’s Approach to Nationhood and Zionism in Meshekh Hōkhmah,” *Hakirah* vol 31, 2022, Steinmetz argues that *Meshech Chochmah* on Genesis 50:24 serves as an “almost direct rebuttal of the Uganda Proposal.” This assertion, however, appears unfounded. In this passage, RMS follows traditional methods of *pshat* and *drash* to explain the verse’s historical context. There is no evidence that the phrase “even if a prophet were to tell them to ascend to a different land” is directed toward his own generation. Notably, he uses the third person—“if he says to **them**” (*lahem*)—rather than the second person—“if he says to **you**” (*lachem*). When RMS intends to address his contemporaries, he does so explicitly, as seen in his clear critiques of the Rabbinat of his own generation; see note 10 above. Consequently, reading these passages as direct rebuttals to contemporary movements—such as the Uganda Proposal—imposes a polemical intent that is absent from RMS’s textual analysis.

¹³ *Meshech Chochmah*, Genesis 50:24: “Joseph said to his brothers, I am about to die. God will surely remember you and bring you up from this land to the Land which He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” RMS explains the verse as follows: “For behold, [Joseph] taught them [his brothers] that they must not ascend ‘as a wall’ (based on *Kesubos* 111a) until a prophet comes from Hashem and says ‘*pakod yifkod*,’ (God will remember...) [this is the interpretation of ‘*pakod yifkod*’]. This is a lesson for all generations: that they should not ascend on their own initiative [RMS derives this from the text “And He will bring you up,” rather than “And you shall go up”]. This is unlike the children of Ephraim, who prematurely forced ‘the End’ (the redemption). Furthermore, even if a prophet says to them to ascend to a different land, he would be a false prophet; he must specifically say they shall ascend ‘to the Land which He swore to our forefathers.’”

not oppose the migration of individual Jews. He prioritized physical safety and the preservation of life, viewing such emigration as a legitimate necessity. He considered the Balfour Declaration and its subsequent ratification at the San Remo Conference as a historic “untying of the oaths”¹⁴ by the international recognitions. This provided for RMS a strictly Halachic mandate for immigration to the Land, transforming Eretz Yisrael from a site of individual refuge into a primary national frontier for the survival of the Jewish people.

RMS’s approach to the Jewish politics of his era was defined by a deliberate refusal to engage in direct public polemics against competing ideological movements. He resisted joining the organized anti-Zionist camp, just as he declined formal affiliation with either Mizrahi or Agudath Israel (although each claimed he did). While some scholars interpret his writings as a sharp ideological critique of secular nationalism, this interpretation is arguably incorrect. Instead, careful engagement with RMS’s work reveals that his writing lacks both polemics (attacking or refuting opposite views) and apologetics (providing justifications to defend historic Judaism or his own beliefs). Rather, in his writings, he repeatedly insists upon a fundamental historical fact: that Judaism, as a distinct phenomenon, preserved its constant identity and continuity for two millennia solely through its collective religious praxis. He presents this continuity not as a partisan argument against secular nationalism, but simply as the irreducible reality of Jewish existence. For RMS, religious observance was not a mere ideology to be defended, but the empirical historical mechanism that had embodied and sustained the nation until his own time. By anchoring Jewish identity in collective religious praxis, he viewed the Land of Israel not merely as a political territory for national self-determination, but as the primary theater where the “historical mechanism” of Jewish praxis reached its full potential.¹⁵

This pragmatic approach to migration and politics was mirrored in RMS’s internal communal leadership style, which I characterize as a “proto-separation” of religion and state. He remained intentionally uninvolved in the vitriolic political disputes of his era, positioning his leadership beyond the reach of sectarian conflict. Guided by the principle of *Darchei Noam*, RMS recognized that a coercive or dismissive Rabbinate

¹⁴ RMS’s letter of support for Keren Hayesod uses the phrase “fear of the oaths was removed” restoring the commandment to settle the Land. The letter appeared in *HaTor* (Year 2, Issue 24) on June 9, 1922.

¹⁵ For example, this is how I read the *Meshech Chochmah*’s commentary on Genesis 46:2 and Exodus 12:14. Furthermore, the Land of Israel is the only place where a multitude of mitzvos, namely the *mitzvos bathnyos ba’aretz*, can be fulfilled.

would only accelerate the abandonment of religious observance and eventual assimilation. In practice, RMS championed a Rabbinate that served the entire people, regardless of their ideological drift, through understanding and support. He believed that for a rabbi to be an effective guardian of the people's free agency, he must maintain a position of communal leadership above the fray of partisan politics. By decoupling the Rabbinate from political structures, he ensured that his voice remained a source of *Darchei Noam*, capable of providing a "rational corrective" to the entire community. He firmly believed that this strategic neutrality would preserve the Jewish social fabric of Dvinsk and beyond, acting as a unifying compass for a nation navigating an extremely turbulent Diaspora cycle.

As we approach the centennial *yabritzeit* of Rabbi Meir Simchah Cohen on the 4th of Elul 5786, this year (August 17, 2026), his legacy as the author of the *Meshech Chochmah* and *Ohr Samei'ach* remains more relevant than ever. This milestone offers a unique vantage point from which to evaluate his "Rationalist Meta-History" and the accuracy of his social observations. Over the last century, the "storm winds" he described have reshaped the Jewish world, moving the "frontier" of creative life from the centers of Europe to Eretz Yisrael and the New World, exactly as his cyclical theory predicted.

This centennial year is a perfect opportunity to highlight RMS's enduring relevance: His approach of *Darchei Noam* serves as a vital model for contemporary leadership, advocating for a Rabbinate that bridges gaps and heals fractures within the nation rather than deepening them. In an era often defined by deep ideological fragmentation throughout the Jewish community, RMS's teaching encourages us to find unity not just in response to external threats, but as a proactive realization of our shared essence. 