

Shedding Light: R. Meir Simḥah ha-Kohen's Approach to Ta'amei ha-Mitzvot in Meshekh Hokhmah*

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I. Introduction

The search for *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* (reasons for the Torah's commandments) is an enterprise which has occupied the minds and captured the hearts of Jewish thinkers through the ages. Though, in some instances, the Torah itself "was generous in giving reasons for its commands," far greater are the number of instances in which no explicit reason is provided.¹ Isaac Heinemann documented and assessed the progression of this field of thought, presenting and analyzing the approaches of philosophers and exegetes from Talmudic times through the renaissance.² Alexander Altmann

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¹ See Isaac Heinemann, *The Reasons for the Commandments in Jewish Thought: From the Bible to the Renaissance*, trans. Leonard Levin (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2008), 12. See also Alexander Altmann, "Reasons for the Commandments," in *Jewish Values*, ed. Geoffrey Wigoder (Jerusalem: Keter Books, 1974), 236. Altmann points to *Shemot* 22:6, 23:9, *Devarim* 11:19, 17:16–17, 23:4–5 as representative examples of reasons for commandments offered by the Bible. See also Moshe Meir, "Ta'amei ha-Mitzvot—Gilgulei Ra'ayono?" (Heb.), *Hagut* 3/4 (2002): 29–30. See also Ibn Ezra's *Yesod Mora* (8), cited by Heinemann (p. 76). See also Micah Goodman, *Maimonides and the Book That Changed Judaism: Secrets of The Guide for the Perplexed* (JPS, 2015), 113 who notes that the Torah's tendency to ignore *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* represents "a radical change in the history of religion and a decisive break with the other religions of the time."

² Heinemann, *Reasons*.

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outlined this development from “Hellenistic literature” through “twentieth-century philosophers.”³ These overviews are helpful in gaining perspective on the initiative, its trends, and the various stimuli which “provoked” Jewish replies and rationalizations.⁴

Whereas the pursuit of *ta’amei ha-mitzvot* was “a single movement, with a unified objective: to defend the mitzvot and bring their value into the light of day,” the techniques and perspectives differed based on the pursuer’s philosophical disposition and socio-intellectual environment.⁵ Abraham Kaplan identifies ten categories of explanations employed in the search for *ta’amei ha-mitzvot*.⁶ In some cases, specific thinkers have a predilection for specific explanatory styles. Whereas the kabbalist peered through an esoteric lens, the rationalist observed logical commands grounded in marked pragmatism. In other cases, a person’s approach may be an amalgamation of multiple styles. Of course, apologetics feature prominently in the discussion, as well. Heinemann highlights a certain reactionism underlying the pursuit of *ta’amei ha-mitzvot*: “To be sure, defense of the mitzvot changed its approach with the change of the attackers.”⁷ Interreligious encounters, internal struggles, and contemporary zeitgeists all encouraged great Jewish minds to consider, defend, and promote the reasons behind the Torah’s commandments.⁸ This, too, contributed to the varied nature of the approaches to discovering the *ta’amei ha-mitzvot*.

In his magisterial Biblical commentary, *Meshekh Hokhmah*, R. Meir Simḥah ha-Kohen of Dvinsk (d. 1926) consistently engages in the age-old hunt for *ta’amei ha-mitzvot*. With characteristic creativity, R. Meir Simḥah utilizes his multi-faceted proficiency in all areas of Torah literature to address and assess various commandments and their reasonings. While R. Meir Simḥah did not compose a work exclusively devoted to this cause, his exhaustive analysis of the Torah *ipso facto* includes an analysis of its *mitzvot*.⁹ Understandably, these analyses are scattered across his lengthy commentary, leaving his methodology and opinions indiscernible to the

³ Altmann, *Reasons for the Commandments*, 236–245.

⁴ See Altmann, *Reasons for the Commandments*, 236 regarding “Christian attacks on ‘the law’” beginning in the second century.

⁵ See Heinemann, *Reasons*, 165.

⁶ Abraham Kaplan, “Explanations of Ritual,” *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah* 13 (5744/1944): 6–17.

⁷ Heinemann, *Reasons*, 178. See also R. Dr. Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (Yale University Press, 1980), 403–6.

⁸ For example, see Heinemann, *Reasons*, 22, 45, 127, 141, 164, 167.

⁹ For a similar observation, see Yonah Ben-Sason, *Mishnato ha-Iyunit Shel Ba’al “Meshekh Hokhmah”* (Jerusalem, 5756), 67.

casual reader. However, a more scrupulous investigation along with a judicious gathering of his comments yield a vivid picture of his unique contribution to the *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* discussion.¹⁰

In this essay, I will present such an investigation, with the goal of unveiling R. Meir Simḥah's approach—or approaches—to *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*. To this end, I will mainly utilize Maimonides' approach in his *Moreh Nevukhim* (vol. 3) as a foil. R. Dr. Isadore Twersky justly referred to Maimonides' engagement in the *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* discussion as the “peak” of “attempts to provide rationalizations for the commandments, to uncover their deeper meaning or profound logic.”¹¹ The Maimonidean rationalization of *mitzvot* “is the most comprehensive and ambitious attempt.” Thus, “Maimonides' system provides a paradigm for a complete conceptualization of this discipline in its various forms.”¹² It is for this reason that Maimonides' systematic discussion of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* has been the subject of an impressive amount of literature.¹³ Maimonides' comprehensive exposition of the *mitzvot* is key to understanding all his thought. It also set the stage for all future endeavors to explain the reasons for *mitzvot*, becoming eternally pervasive and relevant to the discipline.¹⁴ All analyses of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* must, at some point, utilize Maimonides' work. This fact, along with R. Meir Simḥah's personal penchant for and association with Maimonides, makes *Moreh Nevukhim* the perfect springboard, touch-point, and foil for appreciating the exposition of the *mitzvot* found in *Meshekh Hokhmah*. Largely, R. Meir Simḥah followed in the footsteps of his great hero in this realm. Thus, there is significant overlap between the two, with Maimonides' voice echoing loudly throughout *Meshekh*

¹⁰ Pieces in *Meshekh Hokhmah* are often lengthy and multifaceted. As such, it would be difficult to find specific lines which are cited in the footnotes below. To assist the reader who would like to see the sources inside, see a compilation of relevant sections in *Meshekh Hokhmah* in Appendix I.

See <https://Hakirah.org/vol37SteinmetzAppendices.pdf>.

¹¹ Twersky, *Introduction*, 373.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ For partial bibliographies, see Twersky, *ibid.*, n. 47; see also Don Seeman, “Reasons for the Commandments as Contemplative Practice in Maimonides,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 103, no. 3 (2013), 299–300, no. 6; see also Goodman, *Maimonides*, 113–38. See also Jacob I. Dienstag, “Ta'amei ha-Mitzvot be-Mishnat ha-Rambam,” *Daat* 41 (1998): 101–14.

¹⁴ See Meir, *Ta'amei ha-Mitzvot*, 33; see also R. Dr. Isadore Twersky, “On Law and Ethics in the *Mishneh Torah*: A Case Study of *Hilkhot Megillah* II:17,” *Tradition* 24, no. 2 (Winter, 1989): 139–40.

Hokhmah. However, R. Meir Simḥah did periodically expand on Maimonides' thought, and, in some instances, he diverged from the Maimonidean path.

II. The Merits and Demerits of Studying Ta'amei ha-Mitzvot

When addressing the theme of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* in the Maimonidean oeuvre, R. Dr. Twersky structures the study as a sequence of questions. The third question—assuming reasons for the commandments exist and are discernible—is whether the reasons should be investigated.¹⁵ Of course, the pursuit of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* was not without its detractors.¹⁶ Maimonides (*Moreh Nevukhim* 3:26) accounts for objectors on the grounds of potential antinomianism. In a way, rationalizing the *mitzvot* may detract from their inherent worth.¹⁷ Others were wary of the intellectualization of *mitzvot*, likely leading to an inauthentic, selfish observance of the Torah.¹⁸ However, as Kaplan notes, “[u]nderstanding can heighten appreciation.”¹⁹ In the words of R. Dr. Twersky, “[u]nreflective performance, without attention to meaning and the end of the action, falls short of the desired goal.”²⁰

Maimonides, of course, submits to the latter approach, placing high value on *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* and investing substantial efforts into discerning them.²¹ R. Meir Simḥah's consistent attempts to explain *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* implicitly telegraph his concurrence with Maimonides on the appropriateness of the venture. Though he rarely explicates this attitude, in one instance R. Meir Simḥah refers to the quest to understand the *mitzvot* as “the highest [level] of wisdom.”²²

¹⁵ Twersky, *Introduction*, 374.

¹⁶ For example, see *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:31.

¹⁷ See Twersky, *Introduction*, 391–3; see also Kaplan, “Explanations of Ritual,” 6; see also Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (NY: Schocken Books, 1941), 29.

¹⁸ Twersky, *Introduction*, 374; Kaplan, *ibid.*; see also Seeman, “Reasons,” 298–9.

¹⁹ Kaplan, *ibid.*, 6.

²⁰ Twersky, *Introduction*, 395. See also Twersky, “On Law and Ethics in the *Mishneh Torah*: A Case Study of *Hilkehot Megillah* II:17,” *Tradition* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1989): 139; see also Twersky, “Make a Fence Around the Torah,” *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 8 (1998–1999): 35. For a concise overview of the arguments for and against delving into *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*, see Heinemann, *Reasons*, 1–4.

²¹ See *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:26. Twenty-five chapters in the third volume of this work are devoted to exploring *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*.

²² *Meshkeh Hokhmah*, *Shemot* 32:16. Of course, the high level of wisdom contained therein does not imply the ability to capture all said wisdom with the human

III. Mitzvot: For Whose Benefit?

One fundamental question which must be addressed by all who seek the reasons for the commandments is whether the gains of the *mitzvot* benefit the Commander or the subject.²³ The esoterically-inclined tended to offer reasons which seem to attribute to the *mitzvot* implications for “upper worlds,” *sefirot*, and even God himself.²⁴ Essentially, the *mitzvot* are “tools for cosmic rectification.”²⁵ Some thinkers, including Ibn Ezra, assert that certain actions are prohibited due to their contradiction to the normal order of the world, seemingly uprooting natural states of existence.²⁶ Understandably, Maimonides' conception of a perfect God combined with his rationalist mode of thought leaves no room for such attributions to the *mitzvot*.²⁷ In his Epistle to Yemen, Maimonides writes,

If he could only fathom the inner intent of the law, he would realize that the essence of the true divine religion lies in the deeper meaning of its positive and negative precepts, every one of which will aid man in his striving after perfections and remove every impediment to the attainment of excellence.²⁸

In his *Moreh Nevukhim* (3:27), Maimonides says, “the law as a whole aims for two things: the welfare of the soul and the welfare of the body.”²⁹

intellect. See *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkebot Temurah* 4:13 and *Hilkebot Me'ilah* 8:8 where Rambam insinuates the ultimate inability to fully comprehend *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*. Nonetheless, he strongly encourages a spirited pursuit of the deepest comprehension humanly possible. This remains true in the realm of studying *hukim* (*mitzvot* whose reasons are inscrutable), as well. See also Twersky, R. Yitzḥak, *Perpetuating the Masorah*, ed. Horowitz and Shapiro (2023), p. 92 for an application of this point to the *mitzvot* of *Talmud Torah*. However much man learns and understands, the vastness and depth of Torah remains open-ended. The Torah commands its adherents to put forth their best efforts to plumb its depths.

²³ See Ben-Sason, *Mishnato*, 67–8.

²⁴ Heinemann points to R. Judah ha-Levi, R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, R. Yosef Albo, and R. Don Isaac Abarbanel as examples of Jewish thinkers who attributed esoteric reasons to the *mitzvot*, sometimes including effects on otherworldly entities.

²⁵ Goodman, *Maimonides*, 113–14.

²⁶ Cited in Heinemann, *Reasons*, 79.

²⁷ Goodman, *Maimonides*, 114.

²⁸ Maimonides, *Iggeret Teiman*, ed. A.S. Halkin, trans. B. Cohen (NY, 1952), p. 4 (cited in Twersky, “On Law and Ethics,” 139).

²⁹ See also *Moreh Nevukhim* (3:54): “[I]n order that the character of each individual should tend toward excellence. Most of the commandments are designed to achieve this kind of moral perfection.” See also *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:27, 28, 31, 35.

In *Perush ha-Mishnah*, Maimonides writes, “If you test most of the commandments from this vantage point, you will find they are all for the discipline and guidance of the faculties of the soul.”³⁰ The *mitzvot* were given as tools for self-perfection, with the stated goal of bettering the individual and society.³¹

On this issue, R. Meir Simḥah, like Maimonides, unambiguously states that God stands to gain nothing from the actions of mortals.

... It is known that the goal of idolatry was to benefit the influencing images (per their imagination) ... Until the Holy One, blessed is He, enlightened [the world] with the light of His Torah, in which he issued commandments to Israel for their benefit and for the perfection of existence—not for His perfection, [as it says] “for if you are righteous, what have you given Him?” (*Iyov* 35:7).³²

R. Meir Simḥah repeatedly returns to this declaration and the proof text.

For the man who is commanded in something, the commandment is exclusively for his benefit and his betterment... Dissimilar is the Creator, may He be blessed, who gains no benefit from the creation, “for if you are righteous, what have you given Him? (*Iyov* 35:7). As such, His sole intent is for our betterment and to give us life.³³

In explaining the Torah’s charge “to keep the commandments of God and his statutes, which I command you today, for your good” (*Devarim* 10:13), R. Meir Simḥah writes,

For the Torah in its entirety is for the good of the human species and its existence... therefore its ways are not grounded in things which weaken physicality and its strengths...³⁴

The commandments are beneficial strictly to the human beings who abide by them. God, in His absolute perfection, stands unaffected by man’s performance of His commands.³⁵

Heinemann observes that many of the leading Jewish thinkers contended that there are not only reasons specific to each *mitzvah*, “but there is also a uniform purpose to the entire Torah: it leads—either directly or indirectly—to knowledge of God (*Guide*), or to love of God (*Crescas*), or

³⁰ *Shemonah Perakim*, ch. 4. See also his *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:13.

³¹ See Goodman, *Maimonides*, 114–15; see also Twersky, *Introduction*, 388.

³² MH, *Va-Yikra*’ 22:26–32

³³ MH, *Devarim* 6:24–5. See also MH, *Va-Yikra*’ 19:3; *Devarim* 16:21; 30:20.

³⁴ MH, *Devarim* 10:13–16.

³⁵ See also Ben-Sason, *Mishnato*, 68.

to the pure reverence of God (Albo).³⁶ Much like these predecessors, R. Meir Simḥah regularly describes an overall purpose to the entire makeup of God's commandments, though the descriptions differ slightly in each instance.

All of these are commandments which involve actions, therefore they are the ones which refine [him], they are the ones which purify the physicality, so that the divine light will appear on him.³⁷

However, if you will say that in the future (i.e., Messianic times) there will be no evil inclination... then the commandments will be nullified, then it appears that commandments only exist to remove the evil nature of physicality, the inciteful and cruel afflicter.³⁸

In these instances, R. Meir Simḥah stresses that the *mitzvot* are beneficial in that they refine those who perform them, offset their evil inclinations, and bring upon them the presence of God. In other cases, he emphasizes the *deveikut* (clinging) which one achieves through performance of *mitzvot*.³⁹ The commandments bind the subjects to their Commander.

IV. Are There Non-Rational Mitzvot?

The Torah distinguishes between "*mishpatim*" and "*hukim*." Classically, the distinction is assumed to lie in the fact that "*mishpatim*" are discernibly rational, whereas "*hukim*" are inscrutable. R. Saadiah Gaon coined the terms "*mitzvot sikhliyot*" and "*mitzvot shimiyyot*," which Heinemann translated as "rational commandments" and "hortative commandments," respectively.⁴⁰ Whereas some assume this to mean that *hukim* have no reason, Maimonides rejects this approach, explaining that even the *hukim* are based in reason, but the reason may be so deeply hidden that, due to our deficiencies, they are beyond our intellectual grasp.

Those commandments whose utility is clear to the multitude are called *mishpatim*, and those whose utility is unclear are called *hukim*... this legislation is not a vain matter without a useful end... if it seems

³⁶ Heinemann, *Reasons*, 150. See also Meir, *Ta'amei ha-Mitzvot*, 33.

³⁷ MH, *Shemot* 20:18.

³⁸ MH, *Bereishit* (end of Parshat V'a-Yehi, s.v. *Berakhot* 18a).

³⁹ See MH, *Be-Midbar* 15:40; *Devarim* 28:48.

⁴⁰ Heinemann, *Reasons*, 52–3.

to you that this is the case with regard to some of the commandments, the deficiency resides in your apprehension.⁴¹

Maimonides assumes that there are reasons for all commandments.⁴² Some are extant but obscured. Still others are so deeply hidden that their discovery is beyond the natural intellectual capacity.⁴³ However, digging for these reasons is a worthwhile endeavor.⁴⁴ In fact, an overwhelming portion of Maimonides' energies in his *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* exploration is directed toward the goal of understanding *hukim*.

Here too, R. Meir Simḥah continues in the way of Maimonides. In *Meshekh Hokhmah*, he regularly notes the distinctions between *mishpatim* and *hukim*, *sikhliyot* and *shim'iyot*.⁴⁵ Often, he observes the apparent indiscernibility of certain precepts.

And the ways of the Torah are lofty to the point where they are [too] far from our reach to attribute meaning to everything.⁴⁶

Some of the Torah's reasons, he says, are beyond our natural intellectual capacity.⁴⁷ In discussing the commandment of *shemittah* (the Sabbatical year), R. Meir Simḥah offers one reason, but then adds,

All the more so, there are many concepts deeper than human wisdom, attained only by the true God who knows everything, as it says, "a Sabbath to God."⁴⁸

⁴¹ *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:26. See also Heinemann, *Reasons*, 98. Heinemann (pp. 20–1) cites a *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* (4) to this effect as well. See also *ibid.*, 54–5, 76. Ibn Ezra (*Yesod Mora*, 8) has a similar approach, echoing Maimonides' novel interpretation of the verse "for it is not an empty thing for you" (*Devarim* 32:47), based on *Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Pe'ah* 1. See also Heinemann, *Reasons*, 76.

⁴² See also *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:31 for Maimonides' interpretation of *Devarim* 4:6 to this effect. As noted by R. Dr. Twersky (*Introduction*, 385), this interpretation was foreshadowed by Ibn Ezra and R. David Kimḥi.

⁴³ *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:26. See also Heinemann, *Reasons*, 98. For more examples of concepts which lay beyond the grasp of the human intellect, see *Moreh Nevukhim* 1:58. See also Meir, *Ta'amei ha-Mitzvot*, 35.

⁴⁴ See Twersky, *Introduction*, 385–6. See also fn. 22 above.

⁴⁵ See MH, *Va-Yikra* 23:22 s.v. "*u-ve-kutzrekhem*"; *ibid.* 19:36; 20:26; *Devarim* 7:12–15. Interestingly, R. Meir Simḥah sometimes stresses the superiority of *hukim* while, at other times, stressing the superiority of *mishpatim*. Ben-Sason (*Mishnato*, 70–71) observes and comments on this dialectic.

⁴⁶ MH, *Va-Yikra* 27:13.

⁴⁷ See, for example, MH, *Va-Yikra* 21:17–18.

⁴⁸ MH, *Va-Yikra* 25:2–3.

Even with his acknowledgment that certain *mitzvot* are beyond our grasp, *Meshekh Hokhmah* is replete with cases of his reaching for their reasons. R. Meir Simḥah—like Maimonides—assumed that the formidable efforts of a strong mind could unearth many of the hitherto buried *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*. In fact, R. Meir Simḥah contends that the Jews who wandered in the desert after the exodus from Egypt achieved this goal.

For when the words of Torah were absorbed into their bodies and they withstood challenges for forty years, then the *hukim* became *mishpatim* for them. This is because the pure and clear soul understands how [engaging in] illicit eating and [illicit] intercourse causes damage to the soul and distances [one] from the purity and radiance of the divine light. And for such people, the *hukim* are considered *mishpatim*.⁴⁹

R. Meir Simḥah assumes that even the *hukim* have reasons. These reasons are discernible, if only the human mind would transcend its natural barriers.⁵⁰

In a rare instance of apparent divergence from Maimonides' path, R. Meir Simḥah seems to resign himself to the fact that the injunction against plowing with an ox and donkey together (*Devarim* 22:10) has no discernible reason.

Regarding the reasoning of this [commandment] they (the Tosafists) write that the ox chews its cud, and the donkey will watch and despair. This accords with the opinion of Maimonides that [plowing with two animals together] is Biblically prohibited specifically with one pure (i.e., kosher) animal and one impure animal... However, in the *Moreh* (3:49), [Maimonides] writes: "It appears to me that also the reason for the injunction against joining two species in any given work [effort] is nothing but [an imposed distancing] from interbreeding two species. This is to say, 'thou shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together,' since if you join them, it is possible that one will mate with the other..." And this contradicts his opinion in *Mishneh Torah*... And the main thing is that this is one of the *hukim* of the Torah, and we should not investigate its reasoning.⁵¹

Here, R. Meir Simḥah quotes two suggested reasons for this *mitzvah*, struggles to match them with the details of the law, and ultimately submits

⁴⁹ MH, *Devarim* 7:12–15.

⁵⁰ See also R. Copperman's comment in his notes to *Meshekh Hokhmah* (ibid., n. 5). See also Ben-Sason, *Mishnato*, 71.

⁵¹ MH, *Devarim* 22:10.

that the reasoning is indiscernible. Moreover, on this exceptional occasion, he warns that there is no use in any further investigation of its reasoning, ostensibly deviating from the way of Maimonides.

Upon further consideration, however, it becomes clear that R. Meir Simḥah did not here veer from Maimonides' general methodology. When he succumbs to the challenge of unveiling the reason for this *mitzvah* and declares that there should be no further investigation, he does not claim that the commandment lacks reason. Rather, R. Meir Simḥah asserts that the reason for this precept is so deeply hidden that its reason is indiscernible to the natural human intellect. As such, further investigation is an exercise in futility.

V. Reasons Related to Idolatry

According to Maimonides, “[t]he historical-religious background of the Torah is Sabian culture, a kind of polytheistic idolatry which denied creation of the world, transcendence of God, and the possibility of miracles.”⁵² God’s commandments were addressed to a people steeped in idolatrous paganism; permeated with its ideologies and enmeshed in its practices.⁵³ Maimonides determined that:

the main intention of the law as a whole is to put an end to idolatry, to wipe out its traces and all that is bound up with it.⁵⁴

Accordingly, the Maimonidean conception of *ta’amei ha-mitzvot* is replete with examples of *mitzvot* with the intention of distancing the Jewish nation from Sabian culture and practice.⁵⁵

Scholars have noted that Maimonides identifies two strategies which the Torah employs to achieve this end.⁵⁶ Many precepts forbid practices which were historically associated with idolatry. The prohibitions against cutting hair and beard, sorcery, and *sha’atnez* (mixed fabrics) are a few such

⁵² Twersky, *Introduction*, 389. See *ibid.*, n. 81 where R. Dr. Twersky lists six sources in the *Moreh Nevukhim* which speak to this point, along with multiple sources from other works of Maimonides. See also Howard Kreisel, *Judaism as Philosophy: Studies in Maimonides and the Medieval Philosophers of Provence* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2015), 365.

⁵³ Twersky, *ibid.*; see also Goodman, *Maimonides*, 120.

⁵⁴ *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:29. See also *Moreh Nevukhim*, 3:30, 32, 49.

⁵⁵ See *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:37. For a list, see R. Reuven Chaim Klein, “Weaning Away from Idolatry: Maimonides on the Purpose of Ritual Sacrifices,” *Religions* 12, no. 5 (2021): 363.

⁵⁶ See Heinemann, *Reasons*, 111–13; Goodman, *Maimonides*, 121; Kreisel, *Judaism as Philosophy*, 365–6.

examples. In addition to *mitzvot* which separate their subjects from idolatry, God implemented the more “cunning” strategy of appropriation.⁵⁷ God understood that human nature is such that a people cannot instantaneously uproot deep-seated beliefs, suddenly transforming their way of life and worship. Rather, the Jewish people needed to be weaned, gradually separated from sacrilege, and ushered into the true religion. To this end, the Torah appropriated and refashioned certain idolatrous customs, recalibrated them, and oriented them towards God. The most famous example of this latter strategy, of course, is the Torah’s commandments concerning sacrificial worship.

In *Meshekh Hokhmah*, too, R. Meir Simḥah acknowledges the natural inclination to idolatrous worship.⁵⁸ R. Meir Simḥah presents the obliteration of idolatry as the foremost objective of the Torah.

For, in truth, the whole essence of the religion is to uproot the concepts of idolatry from the hearts of the Jewish people, and to show them that they saw no image (i.e., that idols are false).⁵⁹

In some cases, R. Meir Simḥah presents suggestions already proposed by Maimonides. Regarding the injunction against a man shaving his beard and head, R. Meir Simḥah writes,

In *Torat Kohanim* [it says]: there is a stringent feature to [the prohibition of shaving] the beard as compared to the [shaving of] the head. For, [shaving of] the beard is prohibited to all, whereas [shaving of] the head is not prohibited to all... Accordingly, the decision of our rabbi, Moses [Maimonides], in his book (*Mishneh Torah*)⁶⁰ that slaves are also commanded in [the prohibition against] destruction of the beard... And this is logical as well, according to what our rabbi (Maimonides) wrote in his book,⁶¹ that this was the way of the idol worshipers, to shear and to shave the corners of [the hair on] their heads, and to destroy their beards. And regarding this God commanded us... [S]ince it was one of the laws of the idolatrous nations, the Highest Wisdom decreed it as a law, to prohibit this to His nation, Israel.⁶²

⁵⁷ See *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:32, as discussed by R. Dr. Twersky (*Introduction*, 389); see also Goodman, *Maimonides*, 121–3; Heinemann, *Reasons*, 113; Kreisel, *Judaism as Philosophy*, 366.

⁵⁸ MH, *Shemot* 12:21.

⁵⁹ MH, *Shemot* 19:13.

⁶⁰ *Hilkebot Avodat Kokhavim* 12:1.

⁶¹ Ibid. 11:1.

⁶² MH, *Va-Yikra* 14:9.

Building off Maimonides' foundation, R. Meir Simḥah continues to propose that it is for this reason that the Torah repeats the prohibition of destroying one's hair and beard in the context of commandments to the *Kohanim* (priests): "For this practice was prevalent amongst the [idolatrous] priests of the altars and their holy people."⁶³

Maimonides assumes that the prohibition against eating *ḥametz* (leavened bread products) on Passover is also due to the food's association with Sabian idolatrous practices.⁶⁴ R. Meir Simḥah quotes the same observation from the Talmud *Yerushalmi*.⁶⁵ This, he explains, is why the holiday of Passover—with its prohibition against the consumption of *ḥametz*—directly followed the exodus from Egypt. It was at that moment in history that God separated the Jews from idolatry. Therefore, it was a most fitting time to warn them to avoid food with idolatrous association. In a characteristic, yet impressive display of creative genius, R. Meir Simḥah continues to account for the unique language found in each place the Torah repeats this prohibition based on this background.⁶⁶

R. Meir Simḥah was also innovative in expanding the Maimonidean approach in this regard. At times, he displays how certain laws—left unaddressed by Maimonides—are intended to separate their subjects from idolatry.⁶⁷ The Talmud teaches that the *shelamim* sacrifices may be slaughtered only once the doors of the *obel mo'ed* were opened.⁶⁸ According to the Tosafists, this is true of all *korbanot*.⁶⁹ R. Meir Simḥah explains,

And the reason is that [sacrificial] worship must occur specifically in a place in which God's divine presence is revealed, in order that the worship be oriented towards the source of all sources, and not to a separate force or the like, God forbid... And all sacrificial services are only valid if they began in the daytime, not the nighttime. This is because during the day there is a revelation of God's presence, whereas by night there is not.⁷⁰

⁶³ MH, *ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:41.

⁶⁵ *Avodah Zarah* 1:1.

⁶⁶ MH, *Shemot* 23:15.

⁶⁷ See, for example, MH, *Devarim* 23:18–19 regarding the prohibitions of *etnan zonah* and *mehir kelev*. Note that Maimonides (*Moreh Nevukhim* 3:46) appears to offer a different reason for these *mitzvot*.

⁶⁸ *Bavli*, *Zevachim* 55b.

⁶⁹ See *Tosafot*, *Yomah* 29a s.v. "ela afilu."

⁷⁰ MH, *Va-Yikra* 3:2.

R. Meir Simḥah understood that the risk of idolatrous thoughts is higher in a place in which God's presence is hidden. To create a conducive environment to appropriate religious thoughts, the Torah commanded that the sacrificial service be done only once the *obel mo'ed*—a place of divine revelation—was exposed, and that it begin during the day—a time of divine revelation. In a similar vein, R. Meir Simḥah claims that the reason for the prohibition of slaughtering sacrifices outside of the Temple area is to remove idolatrous thoughts from the heart and focus the worshipper on the true God.⁷¹ Elsewhere, R. Meir Simḥah notes that in the few rare instances in which sacrificial services are necessarily performed at a location external to the Temple, the Torah demands that the service be performed exclusively by the High Priest. The reason, he explains, is because the distance of the location from the Temple heightens the risk of idolatrous intentions. As such, the Torah requires that the service be done by the High Priest, “for he is a man upon whom the holy spirit rests” and therefore “he will not come to think foreign thoughts.”⁷²

VI. Reasons for the Sacrifices

The *korbanot* (sacrifices) are the most prominent and controversial example of Maimonides' concept of appropriation of Sabian practices in the commandments.⁷³ To his mind, the Jewish people were so accustomed to sacrifice, that an immediate cessation of the practice threatened to hurl them back into their idolatrous ways.⁷⁴ Maimonides viewed the *korbanot* as a sort of therapeutic practice meant to gradually wean the nation from sacrificial practices.

Maimonides' view of *korbanot* as an appropriation, accommodation, compromise, or concession was especially controversial. R. Reuven Chaim Klein documents most of the objections against Maimonides' approach, while at the same time pointing to precedents for that position in earlier rabbinic literature.⁷⁵ One challenge to his position is the acceptance of Cain and Abel's sacrifices (*Bereishit* 4:4) well before idolatry began. Similarly, Ezekiel prophesies about the sacrifices which will be brought during

⁷¹ MH, *Devarim* 12:13–14.

⁷² MH, *Be-Midbar* 19:3. Additionally, R. Meir Simḥah, in a bold and ingenious exposition, accounts for the reason for the disqualification of a *kohen* with a physical defect based on the risk of idolatrous thoughts during worship. See MH, *Va-Yikra* 21:17–18. Compare also MH, *Shemot* 37:1.

⁷³ See, for example, Klein, “Weaning Away from Idolatry,” 363.

⁷⁴ *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:30, 32.

⁷⁵ Klein, “Weaning Away from Idolatry,” 5–12.

the Messianic Era (Ezekiel 43). If *korbanot* were intended simply as a pedagogic ploy to gradually wean the people away from idolatry, they would be rendered unnecessary and irrelevant in a time when idolatry will cease to exist. A historically based rationale cannot account for an eternal imperative.⁷⁶

R. Meir Simḥah offers an inventive defense on Maimonides' behalf. He lessens the impact of Maimonides' comments by claiming that his statements regarding the reason for ritual sacrifices are limited to those offered on private altars (*bamot*). Regarding sacrifices offered in the Temple, even Maimonides would agree to a more substantial, inherently meaningful purpose.⁷⁷ R. Meir Simḥah intimates that he cannot tolerate such a conception of the reason for ritual sacrifice.⁷⁸ Rather, he assumes it must have higher purposes.

In one place, R. Meir Simḥah refers to *korbanot* as belonging to "the portion of *hukim*, about which neither the mind nor the intellect is instructive."⁷⁹ However, he generally assumes that there are certain discernible reasons for this *hok*, perhaps among other unintelligible ones. In most cases, he dwells on the connection which *korbanot* serve to forge between God and His nation. For example,

[T]he entire Torah [is comprised of] either *mitzvot* which lead to loving God, like *tzitzit*, *tefillin*, and all of the *korbanot*...⁸⁰

And just as bread binds the soul to the body, so is "my bread" (*"lahmi"*)—referring to the *korbanot*, which bind the divine presence to Israel.⁸¹

Bread satisfies a person and binds the soul to the body. So too, the *korbanot* bind the presence of God's honor to His nation, the nation of Israel. Therefore, the *korbanot* are referred to as "bread."⁸²

⁷⁶ See Kreisel, *Judaism as Philosophy*, 371; see also Kaplan, *Reasons for Commandments*, 9.

⁷⁷ MH, introduction to *Sefer Shemot*. See also Klein, "Weaning Away from Idolatry," 9.

⁷⁸ See, however, MH, *Devarim* 12:13–14 where R. Meir Simḥah relates to the location of ritual sacrifice as a way of distancing the Jewish nation from idolatrous sacrifice.

⁷⁹ MH, *Va-Yikra* 21:17–18. See also MH, *Devarim* 16:21.

⁸⁰ MH, *Devarim* 30:11–14.

⁸¹ MH, *Haftarat Shabbat ha-Gadol*.

⁸² MH, *Be-Midbar* 28:2. Regarding this deeper understanding of the word "*lehem*," see also *Ha'amek Davar*, *Parshat Pinhas*.

Other times, R. Meir Simḥah hints at a more esoteric understanding of *korbanot* and their positive effect on the people involved in the ritual.⁸³ Though R. Meir Simḥah admits that some aspects of the *korbanot* and their reasons remain beyond our grasp, he makes a concerted effort throughout his *Meshekh Hokehmah* to uncover meaningful reasons and benefits behind the rituals.

VII. Reasons for the Details of the *Mitzvot*

Though Maimonides claims that the overarching motivation for the commandment of *korbanot* is weaning the nation away from idolatry, he admits that not all details can be accounted for.

[T]he fact that one sacrifice is of a sheep and another of a ram, and that they number a specific number, for this it is altogether impossible to explain the cause. And anyone who bothers himself to give a reason for each part of the ritual, in my eyes goes crazy in a prolonged insanity.⁸⁴

The particulars of the *mitzvot*, he says, are so that there is a framework in which the subjects can operate.⁸⁵ These comments are often contrasted with comments Maimonides himself wrote shortly thereafter: “There are only a few and some slight details for which I have not given reasons.”⁸⁶ In fact, Maimonides offers explanations for details as particular as why certain animals were chosen for sacrificial rituals, a prospect he seemed to deem impossible earlier. However, this is not a contradiction. Rather, Maimonides felt he could account for the logic behind many, but not all the particulars. He says that it is understandable that some details will be left as unexplained, arbitrary elements of generally meaningful *mitzvot*.⁸⁷

While Maimonides' approach to the details of commandments is ambiguous at best and inconsistent at worst, a search for the logic behind the particulars is a constant in *Meshekh Hokehmah*. For example, R. Meir Simḥah explains why the *korbanot* offered by the *zav* and *zavah* (male and female who were impurified through bodily emissions) are turtledoves as opposed to oxen or rams.

⁸³ MH, *Devarim* 16:21.

⁸⁴ *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:26. See also Meir, *Ta'amei*, 35–7.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:49.

⁸⁷ See Heinemann, *Reasons*, 99; see also Seeman, “Reasons for the Commandments,” 302, n. 16.

This is because the Torah acted sparingly [for the sake of] human dignity. For the *zav* and the *zavah* would be embarrassed were their emissions to be publicized through the [sight of] many *kohanim* busying themselves with their sacrifices. As such, the Torah spared them and required only birds, so that there should be no publicity.⁸⁸

The *zav* and *zavah* bring small *korbanot* which require fewer *kohanim* to protect their privacy and dignity, whereas the *metzora* (leper), whose impurity was already publicized (*Va-Yikra* 13:45), has a more public ritual, so as to publicize his purification. R. Meir Simḥah also provides reasons for the various sites of the sprinkling of blood unique to the purification processes of different types of *tzara'at* (leprosy).⁸⁹ As mentioned earlier, he similarly accounts for the place and timing of all sacrifices based on the need for the divine presence at the site and moment of worship.⁹⁰

In explaining why the Torah demands that the altar be fashioned from stone, not wood, R. Meir Simḥah writes,

He commanded them to build the altar from stone, and that it contain no wood whatsoever in order to [cause one to] reflect upon the fact that, just as the altar—the place of the sacrifices—has no sustenance and requires no water or food, so is the case by all sacrifices, that they are not for the purpose of satiating or adding to His perfection at all.⁹¹

In the details pertaining to the materials used in the construction of the altar, R. Meir Simḥah finds deep meaning. Though more utilitarian, R. Meir Simḥah also suggests that there is a discernible reason for the requirement that the *leḥem ha-panim* consist of twenty-four *esronim* (measurements). He explains that the sacrificial service performed in conjunction with the bread offering involves twenty-four *kohanim*. By preparing the requisite amount of bread, the *kohanim* ensure that each person will receive one day's portion of bread.⁹²

VIII. Esoteric Reasons

Though not a prevalent theme in *Meshekh Hokhmah*, R. Meir Simḥah occasionally uses kabbalistic sources to support decidedly esoteric *ta'amei ha-*

⁸⁸ MH, *Va-Yikra* 15:14.

⁸⁹ MH, *Va-Yikra* 14:51.

⁹⁰ MH, *Va-Yikra* 3:2.

⁹¹ MH, *Devarim* 16:21.

⁹² MH, *Va-Yikra* 5:11.

mitzvot. This, of course, represents a divergence from the path of Maimonides. For example, Maimonides claims that the burning of incense (*ketoret*) in the temple was a way of cleansing the air of foul odors emitted by carcasses of slaughtered animals and other concurrent rituals.⁹³ R. Meir Simḥah notes Maimonides' suggestion, but challenges it:

And many have objected to this, for if that were the case, why is there a specific measurement and weight, and why is there a punishment of *karet* (lit., excision) for one who duplicates it? Rather, in my opinion, the *ketoret* of the seven days of inauguration [of the tabernacle] prove [to the contrary], for they had not yet offered many sacrifices, and furthermore the tabernacle was disassembled daily... Rather, [the *ketoret*] is intended as a "pleasant aroma" as divine service... And it is known to those who are privy to esoteric divine knowledge that there are many wonders alluded to in the *ketoret* [service]... Meaning, the *ketoret* is intended as a service for divine presence which rests upon the ark of the covenant, as that is where His honor convoked.⁹⁴

R. Meir Simḥah rejects Maimonides' rationale, favoring a decidedly esoteric approach to the ritual of burning incense.⁹⁵ In fact, R. Meir Simḥah says that the ultimate reason for the enterprise of ritual sacrifice is esoteric in nature:

All agree that the concept of *korbanot* is wonderful, in an esoteric way. It is an inscrutable edict which induces a sublime effect on the human soul, and [one increases his] perfection and *deveikut* (divine clinging) upon meditating on the action, for all this (i.e., the sacrificial process) was fitting to occur to his own soul.⁹⁶

R. Meir Simḥah also assumes certain details in the sacrificial services have esoteric reasons.⁹⁷ The explanation found in *Meshekh Hokhmah* for the "intention of the commandment of *tzitzit*" is a lengthy, thorough example of the author's esoteric knowledge and his willingness to apply it to the study of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*, as well.⁹⁸

⁹³ See *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:45.

⁹⁴ MH, *Shemot* 40:5.

⁹⁵ See also MH, *Shemot* 25:6 where R. Meir Simḥah notes that the esoteric explanation dovetails with the simple meaning of the verse.

⁹⁶ MH, *Devarim* 16:21.

⁹⁷ See, for example, MH, *Va-Yikra* 2:3.

⁹⁸ MH, *Be-Midbar* 15:40.

IX. In Remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt

The Torah attributes the reason of “*zekher le-yetsiat Mitzrayim*” (in remembrance of the exodus from Egypt) to quite a few *mitzvot*. R. Meir Simḥah regularly invokes this reasoning in a creative fashion, pointing to features of specific *mitzvot* which awaken the memory of the exodus through symbolism.⁹⁹

When God skipped over the firstborns of the Jewish people and killed all the firstborn humans and animals of the Egyptians, it was a display of divine providence and clinging between God, may He be blessed, and His creations who keep His ways and His statutes. As such, He commanded that they sanctify every firstborn human and animal as a remembrance... And He designated the donkey [for this command] to remind them of their entrance to Egypt, riding upon donkeys... to allude to the fact that [every moment] from their entrance to Egypt until their departure therefrom was one long chain of various events which all united to show that the ways of God are all with special providence.¹⁰⁰

In addition to its relevance to specific commandments, R. Meir Simḥah understands the remembrance of the exodus to be the pillar of the entire Torah and its subjects’ relationship with God. He describes God’s retrieving the Jewish people from Egypt as,

the beginning of the *deveikut* (clinging) of the nation of Israel to God, upon which the majority of commandments are built, for example: *Pesah*, *Sukkot*, [all] the holidays, and the like.¹⁰¹

For Pharaoh and his entire nation rushed to send them out from their land. And God hinged the obligation of all commandments upon this moment.¹⁰²

R. Meir Simḥah consistently assumes that the commemorative commandments are not obligatory by dint of their historical occurrence alone. Rather, the moment of exodus was the pivotal point at which the unique relationship of the nation with its Maker was forged, which is why the

⁹⁹ In general, symbolism plays a major role in *ta’amei ha-mitzvot*. This is a recurring theme within *Meshekh Hokhmah* as well. See, for example, MH, *Shemot* 32:19; *Va-Yikra*’ 10:12; *Be-Midbar* 15:40.

¹⁰⁰ MH, *Shemot* 13:13.

¹⁰¹ MH, *Shemot* 3:15.

¹⁰² MH, *Shemot* 12:9–10.

Torah formalizes symbolic commandments to stimulate reflection and introspection about the centrality of said events.¹⁰³

X. Interpersonal and National Reasons

Meshekeh Hokhmah is unique in its noticeable stress on interpersonal relationships and national unity within *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*.¹⁰⁴ Whereas many commandments are obviously focused on social interactions, R. Meir Simḥah—often surprisingly—associates these themes with less expected *mitzvot*. In multiple places, he emphasizes that the “main intent” of the *mitzvah* of *korban Pesah* (the Pascal lamb) is “that there be unification of the entire nation.”¹⁰⁵ This, he asserts, accounts for many of the details of the rituals associated with this sacrifice. He also suggests that the *mizbei'ah* (sacrificial altar) symbolizes “the connection of each member of the nation to one another through their connection to God.”¹⁰⁶

R. Meir Simḥah suggests that all commandments—even those clearly associated with man's relationship with God—are considered within the realm of interpersonal relationships, because every action has a metaphysical impact on all the members of the nation.¹⁰⁷ In an elegant piece regarding distinctions between the laws of Sabbath and *Yom Tov*, R. Meir Simḥah describes the holidays as “commandments which connect the people of Israel to each other.”¹⁰⁸ Most shockingly, he states that this is the goal of most commandments. 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. For example, the [building of the] temple, ascension to Jerusalem during the holidays... tithes... because this is [all for] unification of the nation...¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ Compare to R. Yosef Dov ha-Levi Soloveitchik, *Beit ha-Levi, Parshat Bo*.

¹⁰⁴ Regarding R. Meir Simḥah's approach to nationalism, Zionism, and Eretz Yisrael, see my “A Light Unto the Nation” (*Hakirah* Vol. 31).

¹⁰⁵ MH, *Shemot* 12:21.

¹⁰⁶ MH, *Va-Yikra* 10:12.

¹⁰⁷ MH, *Shemot* 24:3.

¹⁰⁸ MH, *Va-Yikra* 23:13–14. See Appendix II for an annotated translation. See <https://Hakirah.org/vol37SteinmetzAppendices.pdf>.

¹⁰⁹ MH, *Shemot* 12:21.

The commandment to tithe one's produce and to offer gifts to the priests and the poor is understandably interpersonal in nature. However, R. Meir Simḥah makes the suggestion that the commandments to build a temple and ascend to it during the holidays are also related to this social, national theme.¹¹⁰

XI. Benefits, Not Reasons

In the examples discussed above, one sees R. Meir Simḥah's traditionalism alongside his creativity. While his study of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* was inspired by and mostly loyal to Maimonides' method, he often extends the line of thinking and adds his own innovative proofs and examples. R. Meir Simḥah was also unafraid of deviating from the path of his hero when he felt certain details were discernible or when esotericism was, to his mind, fundamental to the reason of a *mitzvah*.

Upon consideration, it seems that R. Meir Simḥah's departures from Maimonides' methodology are not stray examples but are rather representative iterations of a fundamentally different approach to *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*. Maimonides' approach to *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* was decidedly rationalistic. He often displayed how logical reasoning accounts for the motivation behind the commandment at hand. Notably, R. Joseph Ber Soloveitchik leveled harsh criticism of this approach:

Judging Maimonides' undertaking retrospectively, one must admit that the master whose thought shaped Jewish ideology for centuries to come did not succeed in making his interpretation of the commandments prevalent in our world perspective... The reluctance on the part of the Jewish *homo religiosus* to accept Maimonidean rationalistic ideas is not ascribable to any agnostic tendencies, but to the incontrovertible fact that such explanations neither edify nor inspire the religious consciousness... Maimonides' failure... is to be attributed mainly to the fact that the central theme of the Maimonidean exposition is the causalistic problem. The "how" question, the explanatory quest, and the genetic attitude determined Maimonides' doctrine of the commandments. Instead of describing, Maimonides explained; instead of reconstructing, he constructed...

¹¹⁰ See also MH, *Shemot* 23:16 for an additional reason for the command to ascend to Jerusalem on the holidays (*aliyah le-regel*).

In rationalizing the commandments genetically, Maimonides developed a religious “instrumentalism.” Causality reverted to teleology... and Jewish religion was converted into technical wisdom.¹¹¹

R. Soloveitchik observes that the pursuit of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* found in *Moreh Nevukhim* is exceedingly rationalistic in that it begins with predetermined rationales and utilizes them in explaining the motivation behind the commandments. Maimonides, he claims, set out to account for the reasons behind the *mitzvot* as opposed to describing the benefits of the *mitzvot*. In so doing, Maimonides would “explain a religious norm by an ethical precept, making religion the handmaid of ethics.”¹¹² R. Soloveitchik alleges that Maimonides’ endeavor was doomed from the outset due to his “how” approach.¹¹³

R. Meir Simḥah, it would seem, was not limited by this approach. He accepted what he deemed reasonable and fitting from Maimonides’ approach but looked beyond the question of “how” and tried to uncover “for what.” Namely, R. Meir Simḥah was not engaged in instrumentalizing *mitzvot*. He did not impose ethical precepts on divine commandments. Rather, he studied the *mitzvot* and worked to discern their unique benefits

¹¹¹ R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Halakhic Mind* (NY: 1986), 91–3. It is most interesting to note the similarity between this critique on the part of R. Soloveitchik and his well-known comments as to the impropriety of asking “why” in regard to the suffering of the righteous. See R. Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek*. There, R. Soloveitchik argues that the proper question is “what for,” not “why.” The resemblance to his comments here is poignant and telling. For a deeper analysis of this famous thesis of R. Soloveitchik, see my “Questioning the Question of Questions: The Permissibility and Purpose of the *Tzadik v’Ra Lo* Query” at TorahMusings.com [Part I: <https://www.torahmusings.com/2024/08/questioning-the-question-of-questions/>; Part II: <https://www.torahmusings.com/2024/09/questioning-the-question-of-questions-ii/>].

¹¹² Ibid., p. 93.

¹¹³ R. Soloveitchik notes that Maimonides’ approach in his *Mishneh Torah* was different and decidedly more effective. See R. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Mind*, 93–9. R. Soloveitchik’s son-in-law, R. Dr. Twersky, makes a similar observation (*Introduction*, 431–9). See also Seeman, “Reasons for the Commandments,” 316–20. The opposing approaches represented in *Moreh Nevukhim* and *Mishneh Torah* might cause one to call Maimonides’ consistency into question. R. Netanel Wiederblank, in his “Illuminating Jewish Thought: Volume 3” (forthcoming), deals with this issue at length. I thank R. Wiederblank for sharing an early draft of the manuscript with me for my consideration.

and gains. He looked at the themes and motifs which permeate the commandments and attempted to reconstruct the effect those laws would have on the souls and minds of their subjects.

In asking “for what” as opposed to “how,” R. Meir Simḥah also opened new vistas in the exploration of *ta’amei ha-mitzvot*. Attributing “the majority of the commandments” to “the unification of the nation” would be impossible if his goal was to explain why the *mitzvah* was decreed. The command to build the temple and ascend to Jerusalem on the holidays could not be motivated or caused by a moral, humanistic precept. They could, however, be aimed at teaching, displaying, and bringing about “unification of the nation” through contemplation of the benefits therein. Through building a place in which the entire nation gathered to serve God and through ascending to that place in unison three times a year, the Jewish nation can certainly create camaraderie and achieve unity. R. Meir Simḥah’s approach—as distinct from Maimonides—allowed him to explore the *mitzvot* from different angles and draw out broader, more meaningful messages from within, reconstructing explanations which “edify” and “inspire the religious consciousness.”¹¹⁴

XII. Conclusion

The study of *ta’amei ha-mitzvot* features prominently in Jewish thought throughout the ages. While complete success in this realm may be unattainable to any human mind, the collective efforts over the centuries have provided a rich assortment of possibilities, and an exciting field of study. Maimonides’ contribution—with its shortcomings—provided a strong basis upon which to build or argue, depending on the person and his preferences.

R. Meir Simḥah’s *Mesbekh Hokehmah*, though not devoted exclusively to the pursuit of *ta’amei ha-mitzvot*, represents an impressive amalgamation of various approaches to the problem. His explanation of the overall benefits of *mitzvot*, the prominent role of the Sabian background as a context for *ta’amei ha-mitzvot*, and the reasons for sacrificial rituals are comple-

¹¹⁴ Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Mind*, 92. For an explanation and expansion upon these critical comments of R. Soloveitchik as well as a detailed analysis of the distinction between the “why” question and the “what” question, see my *rebbe*, R. Mayer Twersky’s critical essay, “Towards a Philosophy of Halacha” (published in *Jewish Action*, <https://jewishaction.com/the-rav/towards-philosophy-halacha/>). It is my contention that R. Meir Simḥah is an example of an expositor of “a philosophy of *halakhab*” as opposed to the alleged “philosophization of *halakhab*” on the part of Maimonides.

mented by his willingness to utilize esotericism and his penchant for associating commandments with interpersonal relations. As noted, R. Meir Simḥah's creativity is due to his drive to search for the messages contained within the *mitzvot*, as opposed to attempting to impose preconceived morals on the *mitzvot*.

Thus, within *Meshekh Hokhmah* is found a significant contribution to the study of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*. The methodology therein also provides fertile ground for advancing the exploration, with a focus on the goals of the *mitzvot*, as opposed to the motivations behind them. ❧