

# 18Forty Profiles: Rabbi Menachem Froman

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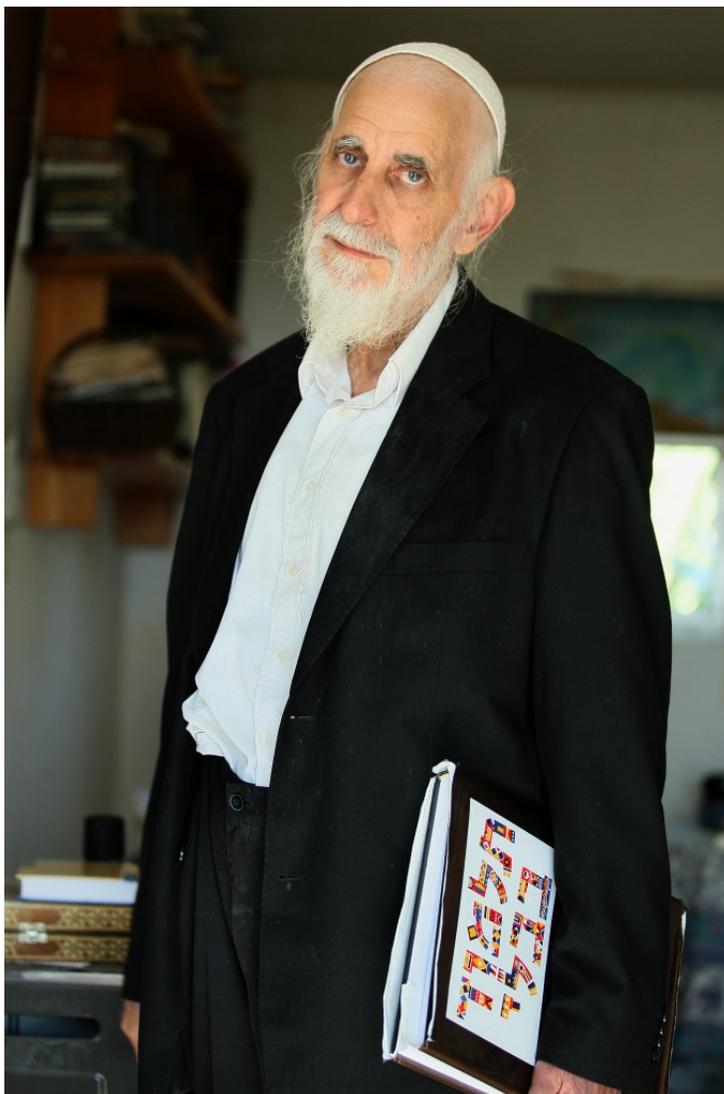
By: Yehuda Fogel

This week, we are doing something different. Welcome to 18Forty Profiles, where we introduce you to the work and life of one of the countless worthwhile people to know about (in our very unbiased opinion). We chose this first profile in the cloudy light of recent events happening in Israel. As we reach a tentative ceasefire after 11 days of unceasing terror and uncertainty, we are turning our attention to the holy land and one person's lifelong mission to open a new approach to discussing the conflict.

It is already a tried and tired trope to point out that too often, social media polarizes, magnifies, and distorts our understanding of the world, sensationalizing events to pull viewers. From afar, it is too easy to distill the conflicts in Israel down to names and groups without faces, just sets of screaming headlines and soundbites. Like all things, there is often a different reality being lived by the people than we might assume when watching our TV screens and scrolling Twitter.

We are engaging in an act of intentional texturing (as we might call it) as we choose to turn our attention to one figure who upset so many of the easy binaries and comfortable feelings we might have: Rav Menachem Froman.

Rav Froman, who passed away in 2013, was *chozer b'teshuvah*, a child of the *Kibbutz* who became a student of the great Religious Zionist Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook, and ultimately a major religious leader in Israel. Rav Froman was the founding chief rabbi of Tekoa, a



settlement in the Gush area, and a founding member of many Israeli *yeshivot*, particularly those in the Religious Zionist-*Chassidic* school.

Most prominently, Rav Froman was an outspoken peace activist as a deep believer that for too long politics have attempted to heal the breach that religion was seen to have birthed, and that it was time for religion to be used as a force of healing and unification as well. To accomplish this, he met with Muslim teachers and religious leaders, learning and praying with them. With some, he partnered in peaceful dialogue, such as with the Suffi (a mystical school of Islam) imams he befriended. With other less savory political characters, Rav Froman engaged in discussion and learning about religion, in the hopes of fostering greater understanding and appreciation.

Rav Froman was a complicated character in Israel and in his own home city of Tekoa, as people from both the right and left were disturbed by his often colorful activism. With his long white beard, clad in a white *shtreimel*, grasping hands with Muslim clerics as he wore *teffilin*, Rav Froman cut a memorable figure. His public war with cancer and untimely passing in 2013, along with the growing popularity of his postmortem book on the Torah and religious life (*Chassidim Tzochakim M'Zeh*, or: *The Righteous Will Laugh From This*) have bolstered his reputation in recent years. In his own life, those on the left berated him for living on a settlement, as those on the right berated him for meeting with figures like Sheikh Yassin, a leader of Hamas. To each, Rav Froman offered response in his highly idiosyncratic way, declaring that “one cannot be only right wing or left wing, as one needs two wings to fly.”

In recent years, his life and thought have received increasing attention, as many people, youth in particular, see him as a figure that occupied a rare position for a Religious Zionist Rabbi—as a peace activist and religious leader.

To honor his legacy, and to direct our own attention to the work of bringing greater understanding to a region full of conflicting opinions, this week we offer the best reading and writing on Rav Menachem Froman.

In our very first 18Forty Profile, we put together what you need to know about this fascinating individual. These three articles, from [Josh Rosenfeld](#), [Shaul Magid](#), and [yours truly](#), cover his religious views, political views, and personal views, each offering us a way to appreciate how curiosity, creativity, and devotion to thoughtful growth can birth a truly passionate path towards a life of meaning in the holy land.

# Inside Joke: The Spiritual Genius of Rav Menachem Froman

 [thelehrhaus.com/jewish-thought-history/inside-joke-the-spiritual-genius-of-rav-menachem-froman](http://thelehrhaus.com/jewish-thought-history/inside-joke-the-spiritual-genius-of-rav-menachem-froman)

Josh Rosenfeld

August 1, 2019



## Josh Rosenfeld

ב"ה

*It is 1922... I am in Jerusalem, basking in the shade of the Rav in his Beit Midrash, day and night. The day came, and I arose to ask him: Our master, there is holiness here with you, a special spirit. Is there a central teaching as well? A specific message, a unique approach? The answer: Of course there is. From that day on, I decided to clarify the teachings of the Rav as a complete, organized Divine message, its foundations, and the foundations of those foundations, and to thereupon organize and write them down... and the Divine message that emerged: all-encompassing holiness, the spirit of the world, the unification of all things, all-encompassing goodness, elevation of this world.*

(Introduction of R. David Cohen, ha-Rav ha-Nazir, to *Orot ha-Kodesh* of R. Kook)

*“What am I holding here?”*

– *My right hand.*

*And what am I holding here?*

– *My left hand.*

*And what is the advice of Reb Nahman of Breslov?”*

*[joyous clapping]*

The man asking these questions seems out of place, adorned with a white *spudik* and white *kapute* on a huge stage with the slogan “*We remember the murder. We fight for democracy*” emblazoned on the screen behind him. His flowing white beard and *peyot* are almost missed for the benevolent, wise smile across his face. One might be forgiven for thinking, *is this some sort of joke?*

The smiling, laughing man on stage is very serious. So are the thousands of people clapping along with him, as the camera pans to the crowd. The setting is Rabin Square, and the gathering is a rally commemorating the murder of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

“[We] must bring The Left and The Right into contact.

*[more clapping]*

[We] must bring Jews and Arabs into contact.

*[more clapping]*

Rabbeinu Nahman of Breslov also said: “There is no such thing as giving up hope!”

Let’s clap hands for the chance of peace *[repeated in Arabic]*.

*Sha-lom.*

*Sha-lom.*

*Sha-lom.*

– *Peace between the side of me that loves my people, and the side of me that loves every human being...”*

The man delivering this powerful lesson (based on *Likkutei Moharan* I:45) in this powerful context is Rabbi Menachem Chai Shalom Froman (1945-2013), may his memory be a blessing. Rebbe Menachem, as some called him affectionately, was many things during his 67 years here. A poet, peace activist, mystic, community Rabbi, soldier, father, and husband. It was the many threads of humanity woven into this unique rabbi that made him into a figure both beloved and scorned during his life and after. Rebbe Menachem was something of a

paradox, occupying roles and espousing positions that confounded those who sought to understand who he really was. For his part, Rebbe Menachem seemed most at peace living his life within these gray areas, comfortable in the contradictions that appeared to resolve themselves within his soul. He was, to use the language of the *Zohar* which he loved and so passionately taught throughout his lifetime, *the secret of all things gathering together as one* (*Zohar Terumah*, 2:135a).

?

Menachem was born in Kfar Hasidim, June 1st 1945, to Leah Raizel and Yehuda Aryeh Froman. His father came from a family that traced its roots to Poland, something that his son would later cite as the background for his unusual style of rabbinic *levush*, an *Eretz Yisrael* riff upon the traditional black dress of the Gerrer Hasidim. He had a secular upbringing and was a member of Labor Zionist youth groups. He served as a paratrooper in the IDF and took part in critical battles during the Six Day War. After the war, he drew closer to observant Judaism while studying at the Hebrew University, eventually moving on to learn at the flagship Religious Zionist Yeshivat Merkaz ha-Rav. Although he spent a year living in the house of the Rosh Yeshiva, R. Zvi Yehuda ha-Kohen Kook, it is told that at the outset of his time there he slept in a sleeping bag, refusing to fully enter the dormitories until he felt his process of repentance was more complete.

The newly ordained Rav Froman moved on to become the Rabbi of Kibbutz Migdal Oz, and taught in several Religious Zionist institutions. He later joined R. Adin Even-Yisrael Steinsaltz and R. Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Shagar) in teaching at Yeshivat Mevor Chaim. While the Yeshiva, also referred to as “*SheFA*” (an acronym of S’hagar, F’roman, A’din), was short-lived, the distinctly Israeli version of *hasidut* that permeated it went on to have major cultural effects across the Jewish world. R. Dov Zinger, leader of the Mevor Chaim High School today and a friend-student of all three aforementioned rabbis, described the atmosphere there:

Rav Shagar, Rav Steinsaltz, and Rav Froman were on the one hand entrenched in *hasidut* in its deepest sense – cleaving to God and a very exacting way of life. Yet on the other hand, it never devolved into ‘*hunyuki’ut*’ (=overly pious), rather it was expressed in a great sense of freedom. This was true of the way in which the rabbis interacted with each other – it was always direct, open, free of pretension, and also of the learning: it was possible to speak of everything, the questions in their proper place without fear; it was possible to expose oneself to literature and philosophy. It was a very unique approach, that engendered strength and freedom amongst the students.

Rav Froman became the rabbi of the Tekoa settlement in Gush Etzion, a position he would hold for the rest of his life. He would also go on to teach in Yeshivat Otniel. Rav Froman married Hadassah, an artist and spiritual teacher in her own right and together they would have 10 children, some of whom work to perpetuate their father’s singular legacy. Rav Froman passed away after a long illness at the age of 67.

R. Elhanan Nir, a foremost student of R. Shagar and a *rosh metivta* in Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak (founded by R. Shagar and R. Yair Dreyfuss), relates that at the funeral of R. Shagar, Rav Froman got up to speak about his close friend. R. Nir, writing after Rav Froman's own funeral, observes that the same words are as true of Rav Froman himself:

R. Shagar was in my eyes the materialization of the promise that lies in R. Kook's teachings... Our community holds close many ideals of The Rav, like *Eretz Yisrael*, the state, the army, the redemption of Israel, but in my eyes the main thing in Rav Kook's teachings is the illumination of the religious world with the light of freedom. The main thing is the free expression in which one lives their religious lives. R. Shagar actualized this – not in the sense of 'intellectual freedom', but rather in a sense of deep spiritual freedom, like a person whose entire soul flows this way. This radiated onto his students, and this, to my knowledge, is the source of all the classic elements of religion, as it is with the students of R. Kook.

Although he did not write much, a posthumous collection of Rav Froman's aphorisms and short teachings are published in a book called *Hasidim Tzohakim mi-Zeh*. Levi Morrow, a scholar of R. Shagar, and R. Ben Greenfield have recently finished a translation of this book, and some of their work can be found at the facebook page "Making Hasidim Laugh". Another book, *Sohkei Eretz*, contains essays and opinion pieces published in various outlets during his lifetime. A third, *Ten Li Z'man*, presents several essays arranged according to the Jewish calendar. There are also two collections of his poetry, *Adam min ha-Adamah* and *Din v-Heshbon al ha-Shiga'on*, the latter of which served as the basis for an album of music called *Kanfei Ruah*. Despite his significance for Religious Zionism in Israel, American audiences have relatively scant exposure to Rav Froman, although some posthumous appreciations have been penned for English speakers. In truth, the best way to experience Rav Froman's teachings and personality is through watching and listening to him, and many of his classes are available online.

This would all seem like a relatively standard biography of a Religious Zionist rabbi and leader. Yet, along the way, Rav Froman broke every mold of what people might assume that to be. He transitioned from the fiercely nationalist *Gush Emunim* bloc to a political ideology that found him meeting with Hamas leader Sheikh Yassin, Yasser Arafat, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. He issued statements declaring his willingness to work toward the formation of a Palestinian state, so long as he could live upon his beloved land as its citizen. Rav Froman believed that the foundation of the Israeli-Arab conflict rested upon religion, and that interfaith dialogue was the key to its resolution. To that end, he drafted a peace agreement together with a prominent Palestinian journalist, and functioned as one of the leaders of the *Eretz Shalom* peace movement. All of this while serving as the rabbi of a large settlement, and deeply steeped in the ideology of 'Greater Israel'. Yossi Klein Halevi, the journalist and author who underwent a similar trajectory in his own life, writes in his memoir *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden*,

For Froman, promoting Muslim-Jewish dialogue was part of the same messianic commitment that had led him to settle the West Bank. This was, after all, the age of miracles. If the Jews had been replanted in the biblical land, just as the prophets had predicted, then surely the prophets' vision of peace between Israel and the nations was also within reach. And the most urgent place to begin was healing the ancient feud between Isaac and Ishmael.

*What am I holding here?*

– *My right hand.*

*And what am I holding here?*

– *My left hand.*

*And what is the advice of Reb Nahman of Breslov?*

[*joyous clapping*]

For all this, Rav Froman found himself the focus of sustained criticism, even death threats. In her subtly fictionalized narrative of her parents lives, *Shemonah Dakot Ohr*, his daughter, Liharaz Tuitto-Froman, describes how their home was repeatedly daubed with graffiti and how her father was publicly cursed in Tekoa's synagogues. At the same time, Rav Froman's boundless love drew near to him people from all walks of Israeli life – spiritual seekers – deeply observant and not at all. Towards the end of his life, this broad soul would lead evenings of Torah and music, teaching *Zohar* and Rebbe Nahman accompanied by some of Israel's famous musicians who saw him as their *Rebbe*.

– *Peace between the side of me that loves my people, and the side of me that loves every human being*

While the public image and acceptance of Rav Froman has softened somewhat since his passing, the radical way in which he lived, thought, and taught has not.

Despite the intensity and revolutionary arc of Rav Froman's life and teachings, he sought to articulate it all through an unbearable lightness of being:

Many years ago, I suggested to my wife that we change our surname from 'Froman' to 'Purim'. Instead of people saying: "Rabbi Froman met with Arafat, he met with Hamas etc.", they'll say "Rabbi Purim". This way, it'll sound totally different. No one will take anything I do too seriously..."

(*Hasidim Tzohakim mi-Zeh*, no. 27)

This is not to say that Rav Froman didn't take himself seriously, but rather it is to be understood as an expression of his characteristic humility and *hasidut*. In *Shemonah Dakot Ohr* (p. 183), his daughter relates that he was an exemplar of the rabbinic dictum (*Midrash*

*Tehillim* on Psalms 16) that “anyone who is cursed and is silent... is called a *hasid*”:

He was always silent. She did not remember even one time where he issued a rejoinder or tried to defend his honor, nor did he depart when he would be screamed at. He sat and listened. To some, it seemed that he was indifferent, as if a clear line separated him and the rest of the world, as if all the deliberations about him passed by and never entered his psyche. She knew this wasn't true, instead, of course he would be embarrassed and internalize it. Nor was this the main point. The main thing was that he found the opposition useful. It allowed for him to take a full accounting of himself (= *heshbon nefesh*), to scrutinize his ways again and again... And if he decided to proceed apace, the opposition was that which gave him the individual strength to do so, to go against the stream and to act from a place devoid of any desire for honor or public appreciation, but rather only because he believed that this was what his Creator wanted of him.

Rav Froman once said that part of his work was to “purify religion”, and clarified that he was referring to “idolatry, egotism... we come from dust and will return to dust.” This abiding humility is perhaps what allowed for such a drastic ideological trajectory in life. It represents the ability to reconsider one's positions and allow for an epistemological uncertainty to inform how new ones are formed. It is this humility which allowed for Rav Froman's fundamental openness, especially in the areas of faith and learning Torah. His son, R. Yosi Froman, relates (*Hasidim Tzohakim mi-Zeh*, no. 85) that “in truth, this was a great matter for him, which he repeated often in his talks and especially in his actions: that faith should not turn into close-mindedness.”

Learning Torah was to be an act rooted in humility and openness as well. Rav Froman would often finish teaching Torah and wonder out loud (*Hasidim Tzohakim mi-Zeh*, no. 130): “what did I do here today? Did my learning take me out of myself, and open me up to God? Maybe it was just to inflate my ego... something more to put in the bag of accomplishments?” Similarly, he taught (*Hasidim Tzohakim mi-Zeh*, no. 134) that when Rebbe Nahman of Breslov taught that Torah should be learned with force (= *koah*; *Likkutei Moharan* I:1), the intent was that one must nullify themselves and their baseline assumptions about the world and give themselves over to listen intently to what God was saying through the text. More bluntly put, Rav Froman wholeheartedly “refused to celebrate in the celebration of self”.

The continual act of opening oneself up and letting down intellectual and egotistical defenses is what fostered the deep sense of freedom – intellectual, spiritual, personal – that lies at the center of Rav Froman's message. In one of his most heartfelt poems, he cries out:

Freedom, freedom, don't stop a thing. Don't suppress anything. Wear one form and another.

Arrive at one place and then another, flowing in every direction.

Where has my strength gone?

Look, I've lost my form. I haven't reached anything. I'm spilled into the void.

Exhaustion casts its net over me. My time is over.

Is there some other horizon as deep and free as this?

(*Din v-Heshbon al ha-Shiga'on*, p. 35)

Here is a bouncing soul, running and returning from the wide open expanses of freedom to a depressingly empty realization of mortality. And yet, even in that abyss of mortality is to be found yet another avenue to freedom. It is a cry from a man defined by his search for some lasting, true encounter with the Divine. With the sense of mission and dedication to the people and the land he loved that defined his life, it is no wonder that we find Rav Froman on his deathbed, singing along with his wife Rabbanit Hadassah to the words of Yoram Toharlev's *You Are the Land to Me* with tears streaming down his face: "give me time, give me time, together we shall reveal the land." There, he issued the following lesson: "In my eyes, religion means to live with death. To live with the illnesses and to live with suffering. To live with reality as it is." Rav Froman taught that the way to do this, or at the very least, the way he did this was with laughter (*Hasidim Tzohakim mi-Zeh*, no. 116): "The truth is that the world is filled with tragedy. Reality is filled with myriad inner contradictions... and I overcome them through humor." This is possible when one recognizes that the most serious thing of all is connecting with God, *deveykut*, and that all other considerations are cut down to size in the face of that goal.

Rav Froman was a man of paradoxes who sought his whole life to reconcile and unify them in the wide open expanses of spiritual freedom. He did so through a fundamental rootedness in love for his land (Rav Froman would often remove his shoes when teaching Torah, "to connect to the Holy Land" beneath him), his family, his people, and for the entire world. It was also anchored in an unusually exacting observance of and reverence for Halakhah, sometimes to the amusement of those who observed it. His daughter relates that it was his practice to go from *shul* to *shul* in Tekoa to try to hear as many blessings of the *Kohanim* as possible in a given day. All of this serious work was accomplished with a lightheartedness – never lightheadedness – and a sense of profound faith.

There are things in life that are indeed big and important, in which the only way to grasp onto them is through laughter. By laughing at them, we also accord them their due respect. This is necessary, because if you try to grasp the thing itself, you run the risk of making it small, rendering it banal. The laughter that opens up the learning is like a handle, that only through it can we raise a boiling pot...

We all are going to die. What can we do in the face of such a heavy, incomprehensible fact like this? Laugh. Laughter is the way to grasp onto death itself.

(*Hasidim Tzohakim mi-Zeh*, no. 111)

To answer the question we began with, yes, this is some sort of joke. It is the most ‘inside joke’ possible, a laughter within one man’s soul as he is continually shocked awake and moved to action by the absurd world he finds himself in. *Hasidim Tzohakim mi-Zeh*, the righteous laugh at this. It is a world as contradictory and paradoxical as the one within his soul, and in seeking to bring peace to that world, he is seeking to bring peace to himself as well, knowing that it is forbidden to give up hope.

*Sha-lom.*

*Sha-lom.*

*Sha-lom.*

*[joyous clapping]*

# And Man Laughed: R' Menachem Froman's Torat Ha-Sechok and its Antecedents

[kolhamevaser.com/and-man-laughed-r-menachem-fromans-torat-ha-sechok-and-its-antecedents](http://kolhamevaser.com/and-man-laughed-r-menachem-fromans-torat-ha-sechok-and-its-antecedents)

Yehuda Fogel

March 5, 2018



*The jester is brother to the sage – Arthur Koestler*

*Jesters do oft prove prophets – William Shakespeare*

The relationship between sense and nonsense, between the rational and the irrational, is often understood to be antithetical, with each of the pairings having a major gap between the two opposites. Within many a normative culture, the scholar and the jester would rarely be seen as occupying similar, or even overlapping roles; there would rather be a hierarchical distinction between the two. The former is noted for the insight and truth (s)he brings to the forefront, and the jester for the comedic relief, the escape from reality, the laughs. Many figures are one or the other, either the scholar or the jester, but upon occasion the world is blessed with a figure that combines the two roles, in someone who stands at the crossroads between sense and nonsense, who brings light into the cracks of a nonsensical world. Rav Menachem Froman (1945-2013) was such a figure. Rav Froman was both the chief rabbi of a West Bank settlement, Tekoa, and also a believer that the way to peace was not through politicians but shared religious experience. He was a student of Rav Tzvi Yehuda Ha-Kohen Kook and a founder of the Gush Emunim movement, a settlement movement often identified with Israel's right wing, but Froman also spoke of Yassir Arafat and Sheikh Ahmed Yassin (the founder of Hamas) as close friends. However, Froman's path was not merely an interesting deviation from the oft-vitriolic world of Israeli geo-politics, but was rather a loaded spiritual world that is beginning to come to light as his ideas are increasingly published.

While there is much the English-speaking world can learn from Rav Froman, I will focus here on one particularly fascinating element of his personality and thought: humor. One book published after his passing is titled *The Righteous Will Laugh from This*, and the assorted pithy thoughts and anecdotes touch upon topics profound and profane, mentioning Amos Oz and Sartre in the same pages as Rabbi Nachman of Breslov and the Zohar. The creativity of thought is exciting, and one constant throughout the work is a comedic edge, a humorous

flair with which Froman delivers weighty ideas. We will first look at some examples of this trend, and will then look at the roots for Froman's particular style in the influences of Rav Kook and Rabbi Nahman of Breslov.

## **Background**

Rabbi Menachem Froman was born into a nonreligious Israeli family in Kfar Hasidim, and after serving in the Paratroopers Brigade during the Six-Day War, went on to study Jewish thought at the Hebrew University. It was here that he began his *teshuva* process, and ended up studying under Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Ha-kohen Kook in his Yeshivat Merkaz Ha-Rav. He received rabbinic ordination from Rabbis Shlomo Goren and Avraham Shapiro, eventually becoming the rabbi of Tekoa and a teacher in various *yeshivot*, including Mekor Hayim, Hakotel, Machon Meir, Ateret Kohanim, and Otni'el. He was married to artist and teacher Rabbanit Hadassah Froman,<sup>[1]</sup> and she continues to teach Zohar and *Hasidut*, in some ways continuing his mission after his untimely passing in 2013.

In order to understand Rav Froman, it is important first to understand the context within which he taught. The world of Israeli spirituality has exploded in recent years, marked by a fast-growing phenomenon of *Hasidut*-influenced *yeshivot hesder*, as well as a weekly publication "*Karov Elecha*" that serves largely Hasidic Torah to the National Religious (*Dati Le'umi*) population. This general trend dates back to the very beginning of modern Israel with the personality of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Ha-kohen Kook (1865-1935). As a thought leader and a writer with an oversized presence in the National Religious community, he emphasized a profound spirituality and connection to the land, and drew from much earlier Hasidic and Kabbalistic works. However, while Rav Kook brought a greater emphasis on spirituality into the then-nascent National Religious community more than fifty years ago, in recent years there have been a few core thinkers that have influentially emphasized the necessity for spirituality, namely Rabbis Shagar (1949-2007), Froman, and Steinsaltz (1937-present). Each impacted the opening of new *yeshivot* within the Hasidic National Religious framework, such as Siah Yitzhak, Kiryat Arba, Tekoa, Otni'el, and Mekor Hayim. While Steinsaltz has received the most attention heretoforth within the U.S. due to his Talmud translation and commentary, Shagar's works are gaining renown among American readership, many of whom are drawn to his interfacing between Postmodernism and Judaism.<sup>[2]</sup> Although Froman's political (or is it religious?) work has been widely publicized by Israeli media, his thought and ideas are gaining traction due to the increased publication of his teachings, such as *Hassidim Tzohkim M'Zeh (The Righteous Will Laugh From This)*, *Sokhaki Aretz, (Laugh My Beloved Land): Shalom (Peace), Am (People), Adamah (Land)*, and the new *Ten Li Zeman (Give Me Time)*.<sup>[3]</sup> While all three merit serious consideration, we will focus on *Hasidim Tzohakim*, as it is in this aptly titled work that Froman's comedic flair is most easily present.

For Rav Froman, humor may be doing something else entirely. *Hasidim Tzohakim* is broken up into 180 small thoughts and ideas, covering a broad array of themes, including the land of Israel, Zionism, bachelorhood, religious coercion, and spirituality, and many share a

counterintuitive comedic edge. This ironic charm can be disarming yet intimately understandable, such as when he writes, “It is said that one must be married to learn Zohar. But how is it possible to marry without learning Zohar?”<sup>[4]</sup> Elsewhere he writes that “the world of Torah is full of debate...Torah scholars argue about almost everything. How do we know that Chazal had a sense of humor? Because they said that ‘Torah scholars increase peace in the world.’”<sup>[5]</sup> In a fascinating piece, he notes that “To be *dati* (usually translated as religious) is to be deep....in which case Amos Oz (the famed secular novelist) is *dati*.” To be clear, this isn’t to say that every single piece in *Hasidim* is humorous as much as there is a thread of counter-intuition present throughout much of the work. In an extremely telling passage, he writes that:

There are many places that R’ Nahman stops something in the middle, but in one place he stops in the middle of a sentence: “At first all beginnings were from Pesah, and therefore all mitzvot are in memory of the departure from Egypt. But now.” The intention here is that in classic Judaism all mitzvot are in memory of the departure from Egypt, and now we have reached a new era – the time of jest (*tzehok*) and freedom. Until now, all of the *mitzvot* were a serious matter. Passover is pathos; the Torah is pathos-driven, full of seriousness. And now we have reached a new era, a new Torah: *Torat Eretz Yisrael*, the Torah of the messiah. All the mitzvot are a remembrance to the jest of Purim and not the pathos of Pesah. “To be or not to be?” is a very serious and heavy consideration, but in that very Shakespearean play (sic) it’s also written that “all the world’s a stage,” everything is a play. You hear me say that the most important question in life is to live or not to live? This whole question is jest, it’s jest...it’s a joke...it’s a joke... There is something that is above to live or not to live, even above (the principle) “saving a life pushes off Shabbat;” what is above saving lives? To be in front of God, in front of God, to be before God in this world and in the next, to be before God and to know that all that we do until now was jest. In life, in death, all is jest in front of God.<sup>[6]</sup>

In this radical piece, Froman associates the “jest of Purim” with “*Torat Eretz Yisrael*” and the Messianic Torah, which Rav Froman saw as dominant during this era of history. These are marked in the presence of God, or at least in the mindset of life in front of God. The antinomian merges with the counterintuitive in the formation of this radical theology of humor, a theology that places Purim over Pesach and laughter over solemnity.

These ideas may seem distant from many readers on a number of planes: the very notion of a “new Torah” can seem dangerously similar to previous attempts to supersede the Torah, as the eternity of the Torah is a necessary component of the religious Jew’s belief system. Additionally, while there are previous instances of humor in the Jewish literary corpus, Froman’s formulation is astounding in its raising of the theological stakes of humor. Although Froman is not explicit about his sources, I argue that he is utilizing and combining two concepts: an emphasis on theological components of divine jest, developed by Rabbi Nahman of Breslov (1772-1810); and the idea of a new Torah, or at least a new style of Torah, developed by Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook (1865-1935). This text presents a fascinating blend of the respective thoughts, merging the two into a composite whole.

## **Torat Eretz Yisrael**

The notion of a style of Torah-learning distinct to Eretz Yisrael is not a modern invention, as roots of this idea may be evident in the stylistic differences between the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds. In addition to the famous dictum that “the air of the land of Israel increases wisdom,”<sup>[7]</sup> this distinction is made explicit in several places, such as in the midrash’s comment on the verse, “And the gold of the land is good,”<sup>[8]</sup> that “this teaches that there is no Torah like the Torah of the Land of Israel, and there is no wisdom like the wisdom of Land of Israel.”<sup>[9]</sup> Later, the Talmud records that R’ Zeira, upon moving to Israel, fasted 100 fasts in order to forget the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>[10]</sup> The medieval commentator Rashi (1040-1105) explains that the scholars of Babylon argued more than the scholars of Israel, who seemed to come to conclusions with greater harmony,<sup>[11]</sup> in line with a different passage in which the scholars of Israel and of Babylon are directly contrasted. The former are characterized as “being gracious to one another in halakha,” whereas the latter “injure each other in halakha.”<sup>[12]</sup> Strikingly, some Talmudic passages align the Babylonian Talmud with darkness, and the Jerusalem Talmud with light.<sup>[13]</sup>

Traditional rabbinic commentaries largely relate the aforementioned passages to methodological distinctions between the two schools, as the Babylonian school is redolent with logical casuistry and folio-long debates, and is the usual touchstone when people reference “Talmudic logic”, in contradistinction to the Jerusalem school’s emphasis on clarity and brevity. This clarity is often attributed to the more easily attainable wisdom of the Land of Israel, which thus mitigates the necessity for complex abstract argument.<sup>[14]</sup> As the Babylonian Talmud was and continues to be significantly more disseminated in traditional Jewish circles, it is interesting that its writers highlighted the beauty of the Jerusalem Talmud.<sup>[15]</sup> Although the passages seem to portray the latter in a more positive light, perhaps due to a discomfort with the negative portrayal of the primary source of rabbinic learning, some seek to mitigate the hierarchal portrayal.<sup>[16]</sup>

Enter Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook onto this intellectual backdrop. As the first Ashkenazic chief rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine, this thinker, halakhist, mystic, and poet par excellence often strove to reveal the positive implications in seemingly negative trends, revealing the light in a (seeming) religious darkness. In their defense of the avowedly secular new Judaism of the time, his writings drew criticism from the trenchant hardline religionists. For example, he writes positively about exercise<sup>[17]</sup>, art<sup>[18]</sup>, and Theodore Herzl<sup>[19]</sup>, in each circumstance drawing the ire of some of his coreligionists.

In this vein, Rav Kook put a lot of thought into the transition from exile to Israel as a shift not only in space, but in thought and identity. The notion of *Torat Eretz Yisrael* gains importance, as it is a lens through which to view the theological impact of this shift on Torah-learning and thought.<sup>[20]</sup> He argues that the movement to the Land of Israel necessitates a broadened perspective, as the *Torat Eretz Yisrael* comprises a broadened, whole-picture perspective, in contrast to the particularistic, individualistic *Torat Chutz La-aretz*. He writes that *Torat Eretz Yisrael* “worries constantly on behalf of the whole, the whole soul of the

entire nation. The details enter the whole, they are elevated in its elevations, crowned in its crowning...”<sup>[21]</sup> This isn’t simply a shift in “the Torah in its understanding in learning, in the four cubits of halakha, but rather an enlightening of all of life... From the depth of spiritual renewal, which prepares for *Torat Eretz Yisrael*, the boundaries that separate topic from topic, area to area... lessen.”<sup>[22]</sup> This whole-oriented perspective encompasses all into a holistic composite, in which everything is realized to be one. He notes that “this broad divine flow...of all areas of the Torah....is available to be understood well only here on holy land...”<sup>[23]</sup> As part of this realization process, one realizes the inner unification of so many binaries: Aggadah and halakha, the individual and the nation, all particulars in their respective wholes. Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlop, a student and companion of Rav Kook, similarly affirms the notion of an old-new Torah for a new age, based off words in the Midrash that states “the Torah one learns in this world will be nothingness (hevel) in front of the Torah of Moshiach.”<sup>[24]</sup>

Froman studied in the Kookian Yeshivat Merkaz Ha-rav and was a close student of its leader, R. Tzvi Yehuda Kook, and thus his conception of *Torat Eretz Yisrael* is significantly influenced by R. A.I. Kook’s. Froman writes that “*Torat Eretz Yisrael* is an entirely different thing than *Torat Chutz La-aretz*. In my time the spirit of matters in Yeshivat Merkaz Ha-rav was as such: We are meriting to a great and powerful thing, a brand new Torah that our fathers didn’t merit.”<sup>[25]</sup> His strong memories of the overwhelming culture of Merkaz Ha-rav are testament to its influence on the then-young Froman. He then writes that the entire idea of *Torat Eretz Yisrael* is a focus on the strength of the whole instead of the particular. He connects this to halakha, noting that the conversations regarding the deal to free captive Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was a question of the greater good versus the pain of an individual man, and *Torat Eretz Yisrael* in such a scenario looks at the “national factors” in addition to the more traditional *halakhot* of *pikuah nefesh*. This isn’t to say that Froman’s view of *Torat Eretz Yisrael* parallels R. Kook’s identically, as the emphasis of divine jest and Purim-esque merriment seems absent from R. Kook’s formulations. This is made apparent in Froman’s statement that “In truth the world is full of tragedies...internal contradictions. The difference between myself and Rav Kook is that Rav Kook overcomes them through harmonistic methods, and I overcome them through humor.”<sup>[26]</sup> However, they do share the view of the heightened need for paradigm shifts orienting the Jewish nation towards a broader, whole-focused thinking, than they had in exile.

## **Divine Jest**

The notion of the “Jewish sense of humor” receives a lot of attention, and the role of this humor in rabbinic literature makes for an interesting history. The Talmud<sup>[27]</sup> records that Rabbah would open his lectures with a joke, and Rashi explains that this is “to open [the students’] hearts with happiness.”<sup>[28]</sup> Tellingly, although Rabbah’s students’ hearts were open with joy upon hearing the joke, they would soon “sit in awe as he started the shiur.”<sup>[29]</sup> It isn’t always easy to identify what constitutes humor in the Talmud,<sup>[30]</sup> as some examples of Talmudic humor may be complex wordplays, insults, and bizarre scenarios; all of these are

perhaps meant to mock, but they demand a high level of Jewish literacy. In later eras, there were even parody books written to imitate the style of rabbinic literature, such as Yehuda Alharizi's *Takhemoni*, the *Masekhet Purim*, and others.<sup>[31]</sup> In the Eastern European context, humor outside of rabbinic literature may have been used as a coping mechanism for constant oppression and powerlessness, as comedic appraisal grants a form of intellectual control of situations where the Jews may have had little other control. Freud, in his *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, posits that Jewish humor underscores the Jewish ability to empathize with the tragedy of Jewish community; highlight the moral values of Judaism; engage in honest self-critique; and embrace egalitarian social standards.<sup>[32]</sup> In any case, humor in rabbinic literature tends to be used as a pedagogical tool to maximize engagement; to mock other movements; or, occasionally, as part of a bantering discussion.

Froman's humor, while disarming, seems to be theologically laden, as is apparent in his equating of humor with both *Torat Eretz Yisrael* and *Torat Mashiach*.<sup>[33]</sup> In some places, his humor seems lighter and incidental, as in one piece whose entirety is his reciting a joke he appreciates;<sup>[34]</sup> in other instances Froman's humor seems to carry a profound message cloaked in comedic quality, such as his declaration that "one can't just be right wing or left wing, as you need two wings to fly."<sup>[35]</sup> This is deeply telling of Froman's own political views as an important figure in both the settler community as well as Jewish-Muslim dialogue and peace-building. In yet other portions, his humor is biting: he points out that given the degree of argument in the rabbinic world it is clear that *Hazal* had a sense of humor, for how else could they state that "Torah scholars increase peace in the world?"<sup>[36]</sup> In any case, Froman's statement that humor is his method of overcoming internal contradiction, as well as his aligning *Torat Ha-sechok* with *Torat Eretz Yisrael* suggest that this isn't the same type of Jewish humor that we have seen already. While there have been many funny rabbis, there have been few that refer to humor with the sort of theological import of Froman's "Torah of Humor." In order to find the roots of this position, we must go back some 200 years to a different countercultural Jewish mystic with a penchant for jest: Rabbi Nahman.

Rabbi Nahman of Breslov (1772-1810) was an early hasidic master and mystic and the founder of the Breslov Hasidic movement. Although "Rabbeinu," as he is referred to, speaks on a number of themes that are relevant to the contemporary reader, his embracing of the so-called "*sechok*," which seems to be an embrace of the ridiculous, is most relevant here. Some of these counterintuitive statements are, like Froman's, a seeming attempt to impart a particular message or piece of wisdom, such as, "The essence of wisdom is to realize how far you are from wisdom."<sup>[37]</sup> In others, he shares a biting comedic edge, as in his opinion that "all the sages of Israel are in my estimation like a garlic peel."<sup>[38]</sup> As a major component of his writings are his exhortations against depression, in some places he writes that humor is important to lift one towards joy, saying with different formulations that "it is possible to come to joy even (alt. only) through matters of absurdity."<sup>[39]</sup> He goes so far as to say that "when a Jewish man rejoices himself through matters of absurdity (*mila di-shtuta*), he creates a major rectification, which is similar to the rising of the sparks of the *Shekhinah* from her exile."<sup>[40]</sup> This embracing of the ridiculous is certainly important in order to rise to

happiness, which is depicted as the rectification of the *Shekhinah*, but a consideration of the following additional aspects of Rabbi Nahman's stance broadens our understanding of the role of humor in his teachings.

Much of Rabbi Nahman's most profound teachings were taught through the medium of fantastical tales; in one, "The Story of the Humble King and the Wise Man," Rabbi Nahman hints at the theological significance of the ridiculous. In this complex tale, a mythical king wishing to have a portrait of a certain other king, sends a wise man to the latter king's country in order to report back on the state of values there. The wise man, intent on delving the values of this nation, decides that in order to know the essence of this country he would listen to the country's jokes, because "when one has to know something, one should know the jokes related to it." This is the joke he heard:

Among all countries, there is one country which includes all countries...in that country there is one city which includes all cities of the whole country which includes all countries...in that city there is a house that includes all houses of that city which includes all cities.... And there is a man who includes everyone from that house....and there is someone there who performs all the jests and jokes.

Although there is much to be gained from this fascinatingly profound story, the symbolism of the all-encompassing country/city/house/laughter is most relevant to us. Nahman of Cherin, a Breslover hasid suggests that the country in question is the land of Israel, the city Jerusalem, the house the Temple, and "this should be understood without explaining, since one cannot explain so much in such matters."<sup>[41]</sup> In Zvi Mark's stunning analysis of the story, the man who then lives in this "house" would be none other than the *Kohen Gadol*, the high priest, who finds a form of jest in the Temple. What is this jest? Mark writes that:

In the Temple, people give presents to the sublime Infinite God, atone before Him with a meal offering of fine flour, see in the smell of the incense of His being pleased, and the Levites sing to Him to make His time pass pleasantly. Is there a greater comedy than that?... The divine comedy describes God, the Infinite, as changing His mind because of the bribe of a calf. While this sentiment may seem to be on the border of heresy, Gelman points out that this statement of divine humor need not detract from the gravity nor legitimacy of the Temple nor G-d's worship. Instead, this serves to remind us of the simultaneous ridiculousness of all attempts of limited human action in the face of an Infinite G-d, as the aforementioned limited humans *continue their worship*. This demands an embracing of paradox, and is in line with a statement of Rebbi Nahman in which he says that "the main thing is the will and yearning...And in this way to pray, study, and perform the commandments. (And in truth, according to His greatness all of these services are nothing, but everything is "as though," for it is all just a joke compared to His greatness.)"<sup>[42]</sup> The paradox of Jewish life, within this perspective, is that it demands us to concurrently worship to the best of our abilities, while recounting that all of our attempts are a joke in the face of the all-present *Ein-Sof* that is beyond our own human comprehension. <sup>[43]</sup>

This is to say that part of the story of Judaism, or perhaps all religion, calls for us to acknowledge the grand absurdity of the presumption that any human activity can change the will of the all-encompassing God, while still behaving and acting as if it could. By God's command, we must believe that our actions and beliefs matter, while by God's existence and love we must understand that the notion of human initiative is ultimately laughable. Characterized here by the *Kohen Gadol's* laughter at the peak moment of human religious observance of the year, Rabbi Nahman isn't suggesting that the *Kohen Gadol* stop his weighty divine service, but rather that it must be held in balance with the realization that everything is nothing and nothing, everything. This laughter inducing paradox comprises the divine jest of our time.

With this intriguing perspective in hand, we can revisit R. Froman's own so-called "*Torat Ha-sechok*." Froman wrote that the Torah of our time is a Torah beyond questions of life-or-death, beyond *yeti'at mitzrayim*, and is rather found in the ridiculous absurdities of Purim. These absurdities comprise all of human life in the face of the supernal "before G-d" that surpasses the gravitas of human life. By utilizing the notion of a "new Torah for a new generation" of Rav Kook, and the existential absurdity-embracing perspective of Rabbi Nahman, Froman forges an eminently enjoyable theology of humor. Definitions of this theology aren't easy, as one gets the sense in reading *Chassidim Tzochkim* that Froman would laugh at the very notion of a definition of *Torat HaSchok*, but it does call for a radical appreciation for the immediate intimacy of God. This intimacy calls all human action into comedic contrast, as any activity is nothing in the face of the infinite.

With a smile on his face and a witticism fresh from his tongue, R. Menachem Froman brought down a Torah of laughter and joy to the Jewish people, inundated with a seriousness beyond its years. Rav Froman sought to replace a lachrymose view of Jewish history with a humorous one, with trails of jest and joy instead of tears. Whether in joy or pain, from its truth or falsehoods, one thing is clear: the righteous will most definitely laugh from this.

[1] Rabbanit Froman appears in many pieces of Rav Froman's works, and is often referred to as "my master and rebbe, my wife..."

[2] Much of this imbalance may due to availability of each writers' thought: Steinsaltz has published more than 25 works, while Shagar's works have been mostly published after his death in 2007, and are thus less numerous.

[3] There have also been several smaller publications that have been distributed to smaller audiences, such as *Din Ve-cheshbon Al Ha-shiga'on* (Law and Thought on Madness), and *Kuf Acher Elokim*.

[4] *Piskah* 169.

[5] *Ibid* 144.

[6] *Ibid* 28.

[7] BT Bava Batra 158b.

[8] Bereishit 2:12.

[9] Bereishit Rabbah 16:4.

[10] BT Bava Metzi'a 85a.

[11] Rashi ad loc.

[12] BT Sanhedrin 24a.

[13] See Sanhedrin 24a, which interprets “He has made me dwell in dark places, as those that have long been dead” (Eikhah 3:6) as a reference to the Babylonian Talmud. See also Zohar Hadash Eikhah p. 93, also interpreting a verse in Eikhah; “And the light’: This is Jerusalem Talmud, which shines with the light of the Torah. After it is nullified, it is like being left in darkness, as it is written “he made me dwell in dark places”, which refers to the Babylonian Talmud.”

[14] See Rivash to Ketubot 75.

[15] It is also important to note that Professor David Weiss Halivni argues that much of the lengthy debates in the Babylonian Talmud are comprised of later “Stammaitic” redactions and if removed would reveal the two Talmuds to be much closer in text and style than usually thought.

[16] R. Naftali Tzvi Berlin, *Kadmat Ha'Emek*, 1:9, writes that the distinction is similar to “One that wanders in a dark palace with many rooms, who can't find his way out...One that has a flame in his hand to see his way out doesn't have to work as hard, but one that doesn't have a candle can escape only by reflecting on the wisdom of the palace, and by failing many times until he comes finds the exit, and understands the wisdom of the building much better than the first.”

[17] See *Orot*, 80:34. In a fascinating account, Agnon tells that of the discussions surrounding the editing process of this piece of *Orot*, “R. Zvi Yehuda Kook recounted that when he was arranging the book *Orot* by his father Rav Avraham Isaac Kook of blessed memory, he brought him the entire work for examination before giving it to the printer. Meanwhile he remarked that it might be worthwhile to omit from the book the section on young Jews engaging in gymnastics, insofar as this section would likely be misunderstood by many and enemies would exploit it in their instigation. Rav Kook responded to him: ‘Do you wish to do this because of the fear of Heaven? Rather it is the fear of flesh and blood, and I don't have this fear.’ See Agnon, *Sefer, Sofer ve-Sippur* (Tel Aviv:1978), p. 352, quoted by Shalom Carmy in “Dialectic, Doubters, and a Self-Erasing Letter: Rav Kook and the Ethics of Belief”.

[18] For example, Rav Kook said about seeing the National Gallery in London that “When I lived in London, I would visit the National Gallery, and the paintings that I loved the most were those of Rembrandt. In my opinion, Rembrandt was a saint. When I first saw Rembrandt’s paintings, they reminded me of the rabbinic statement about the creation of light. When G-d created the light, it was so strong and luminous that it was possible to see from one end of the world to the other. And G-d feared that the wicked would make use of it. What did he do? He secreted it for the righteous in the world to come. But from time to time, there are great men whom G-d blesses with a vision of the hidden light. I believe Rembrandt was one of them, and the light of his paintings is that light which G-d created on Genesis day.” Interview, *Jewish Chronicle*, 9 September 1935.

[19] R. Kook famously eulogized Herzl, and in his remarks drew parallels between those that rebuild the physical structure of the Land of Israel, and *Mashiach ben Yosef*, drawing the ire of the ultra-Orthodox zealots. See Kook, “The Lamentation in Jerusalem: On the Death of Dr. Theodor Herzl.” Kook himself explained later to his father-in-law that in his opinion, Herzl “spoke pleasantly and politely, but... did reveal the fundamental failure of their...enterprise, namely the fact that they do not place at the top of their...priorities the sanctity of G-d and His Great Name... In my remarks, I offered no homage to Dr. Herzl per se.” Letter to R. Elijah David Rabinowitz-Teomim, also known as the Aderet, 1904.

[20] This may be in response to the Zionist value of *shelilat ha-golah*, negation of the exile, which called for a rebranding of the Jewish nation, from weak, passive, ghetto Jew to strong, vibrant, New Jew. Often forcefully detaching themselves from elements of Jewish history in the process, this evolution, or perhaps conversion, was actualized most clearly in the Hebraization of family names.

[21] Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot Ha-Torah*, 13:3. Similarly, he writes, “In every generation we need to love the Torat Eretz Yisrael, and all the more so in our general, the generation of disintegration and rebirth, the time of darkness and light, of desperation and strength. Due to this we need the antidote of life- specifically from the Torat Eretz Yisrael. We need to show the truth and clarity of this divine land.....”

[22] Ibid 13:4.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlop, a student and companion of Rav Kook, similarly affirms the notion of an old-new Torah for a new age, based off words in the Midrash that states “the Torah one learns in this world will be nothingness (hevel) in front of the Torah of Moshiach,” Midrash Kohelet, quoted in R. Yaakov Moshe Charlop, *Mei Marom*, 6:24. Elsewhere, R. Charlop divulges that R. Yehoshua Leib Diskin, appeared to R. Charlop in a dream and spoke to him about the difference between the Bavli and the Yerushalmi. He then told R. Charlop that this was the primary innovation of R. Kook. See R. Yaakov Moshe Charlop, *Hod Harim*, Siman 36.

[25] *Hasidim Tzohakim Mi-zeh*, 127.

[26] *Ibid* 115.

[27] BT Shabbat 30b and BT Pesahim 117a: “Like Rabbah, before he would open (the lecture) for the scholars he would say a humorous thing, and the scholars would rejoice, and they would then sit in awe and he would start the lecture.”

[28] Comments on BT Shabbat 30b.

[29] *Ibid*.

[30] See “But Is it Funny? Identifying Humor, Satire, and Parody in Rabbinic Literature”, *Jews and Humor* (Studies in Jewish Civilization 22; ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon; Purdue University Press, 2010). See also Binyamin Engleman, “*Humor Mutzhar, Galuy ve-Samuy be-Talmud Bavli*” (Hebrew), *Badad*, vol. VIII (winter 5759).

[31] Hillel Halkin looks at the influence of medieval Arabic traditions on the self-deprecating theme in Jewish humor in his “Why Jews Laugh at Themselves”, *Commentary Magazine*, Vol 121, April 2006, No 4, pp. 47–54

[32] Freud, S. (1960). *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (J. Strachey, Trans.). New York: W. W. Norton. (Original work published 1905). See also Elliot Oring (1984). *The Jokes of Sigmund Freud*. Univ. of Pennsylvania Press. ISBN 0-8122-7910-7.

[33] *Hasidim Tzohakim*, Piskah 28.

[34] *Ibid* 63.

[35] Quoted by Raanan Mallek, “On the Influence of Rabbi Menachem Froman.”

[36] *Hasidim Tzohakim*, 148.

[37] *Likutei Maharar*, 2:83.

[38] *Chayei Moharan*, 290.

[39] See *Likutei Maharar* 2:48: “The main thing is to be happy constantly, and to rejoice in all that one can, *even through* matters of absurdity, to make oneself like a madman and to do matters of absurdity and humor and jumping and dancing, in order to come to happiness, which is a major matter” (Italics mine). In *Sichot ha-Ran* 20, he writes similarly, but with an important deviation: “due to the many pains that a person has, that he carries on his body, soul, and money, therefore most people can’t come to rejoice themselves unless through absurd matters (*mila d’shtuta*)...”

[40] *Likutei Halachot Nefilat Appayim* 4:5.

[41] Quoted by Zvi Mark, *Mysticism and Madness in the Work of R. Nahman of Breslov*, 229.

[42] *Sichot ha-Ran* 34-35.

[43] *Ibid.*

## ISRAEL &amp; THE MIDDLE EAST

# West Bank Rabbi Menachem Froman's Zionist Post-Zionism, and What It Can Teach American Jews

The late Kookist leader's belief in spirituality over politics also has a message for Israel's religious right

BY SHAUL MAGID

AUGUST 04, 2015



Menachem Froman (1945-2013) at home in the West Bank Tekoa settlement, 2006. GALI TIBBON/GETTY

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**P**OST-ZIONISM, LIKE ZIONISM, IS NOT ONE THING. THERE ARE POST-Zionists who are focused on revising Israel's "myth of origins" but maintain that Israel has a right to self-identify as a "Jewish" state in

some form; there are one-staters; there are those who believe Israel should be a full liberal democracy with equal rights of all its citizens, in both principle and practice; and there those who believe Israel is a racist state that should not exist at all. Some diasporists and most anti-Zionists would likely not identify as post-Zionists since for many of them the problem is not Zionism *per se*. Rather, many of them argue that living in the Diaspora where Judaism as we know it really began, is the best, or most fruitful, way for Jews to fulfill their Jewishness.

Post-Zionism, however, is not really about the Diaspora, it is about Israel. It is about what kind of country Israel is, or wants to be. For the most part, post-Zionism has taken a secular form. That is, it is promoted by secular scholars and intellectuals who view Zionism as a secular Jewish ideology that is in need of significant revision. Yet there have been a few significant religious voices in Israel who have tried to make what I will call a spiritual case for post-Zionism. Rabbi Menachem Froman is one of them.

While Rabbi Menachem Froman (1945-2013) is not very well-known among Diaspora Jews, he was a highly visible and iconoclastic voice in Israel for the last four decades before his death at the age of 68. He was raised in a Zionist home in the Israeli town of Kfar Hasidim in northern Israel and spent years as a close disciple of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook. Kook's father Abraham Isaac was the first chief rabbi of Palestine and arguably the main source of contemporary religious Zionism. The elder Kook died in 1935 and did not see the establishment of the State of Israel and thus could not predict the challenges political sovereignty would present. His more militant son Zvi Yehuda served as the dean of the Rav Kook yeshiva in Jerusalem until his death in 1982 and was the architect of the neo-Zionism of the settler movement (known as Gush Emunim—The Block of the Faithful, and Yesha, the Council of Judea, Samaria, and Gaza).

Froman was raised in the epicenter of settler ideology. Yet in his tenure as rabbi of Tekoa, a settlement in the occupied West Bank, known among settlers and their supporters as Judea, Froman developed a decidedly anti-militant worldview that was deeply committed to the idea that religion, instead of being that which made

peace improbable, is precisely that which held the key to the solution to the conflict. A committed activist, Froman professed openly that he was willing to meet with any religious leader, friend or foe, who was willing to meet with him. He subsequently met with Yasser Arafat of the PLO, with Sheikh Yassin of Hamas, and with many other leaders in the Palestinian community, all in an attempt to foster dialogue and mutual understanding. But Froman was not naïve. He did not believe “talking spirituality” would

melt away decades, perhaps centuries, of hatred and acrimony. Rather, he believed that the realm of the spiritual—if it could be expansive rather than insular, if it could be inclusive instead of isolationist—was the best path toward fostering human flourishing; that “God talk” could lead to respect for human dignity; that the problem was not religion but politics or, more specifically, religion *as* politics. For Froman, religion had the power to bring disparate people together while politics divided even like-minded people.

It is noteworthy that Froman remained to his last day a believer in the right of all Jews to live anywhere in Eretz Yisrael. In July 1996 he wrote, “As a primitive religious Jew who is connected to the land that God gave my ancestors I can attest: This is also the reason that the connection between those who support Greater Israel (*Eretz Yisrael ha-Shelamah*) and the Palestinians has far greater potential [for success than the left]. This is because the Palestinians are also generally religious, or at least have a strong connection to their tradition, to their people, and to their land. What severs our connection is [only] hatred of the other.” Froman exhibits a kind of “spiritual nativism” that grew from his teacher R. Zvi Yehuda Kook but arguably moves beyond him in that he acknowledges, and



Froman, center, behind Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger and the Dalai Lama, during the Tibetan spiritual leader's visit to the offices of the two chief rabbis of Israel, Metzger, and Sephardic rabbi Shlomo Amar, in February 2006, Jerusalem. (Getty: AFP / Stringer)

affirms, the Arab connection to the land as well. One of his novel solutions, which may be itself a form of “settler post-Zionism,” was to distinguish between the state and the Jewish attachment to the land. That is, to enable settlers to remain in their homes in the West Bank and become citizen of the State of Palestine. While certainly impractical, even utopian, its mere mention cuts through the religious Zionist narrative as it has heretofore been presented by the Kookian school.

Viewed as a renegade in his community, Froman nonetheless enjoyed a kind of immunity due in part to the fact that he was one of R. Zvi Yehuda Kook’s first generation of disciples and was respected by his teacher and his circle of colleagues. Rabbi Froman’s death in 2013 after a long illness was mourned by both Israelis and many Arabs with whom he developed close ties. He also cultivated a small circle of followers who began to see another way besides the militarism and dogmatism of the settler community. More of a teacher and activist than a writer, and more well-known for the force of his personality rather than his prose, Froman nonetheless published many short essays and poetry in Israeli journals and newspapers. His essays have recently been collected and published in a slim volume titled *Sokhaki Aretz, (Laugh My Beloved Land): Peace (Shalom), People (Am), Land (Adamah)*. The essays in this volume span the breadth of Froman’s interests, from the crisis in religious Zionism, to education, ecumenism, politics, and secularism. Included in this volume is an essay titled “Placing Limits on Faith” that was originally published in 1998. Froman structures his remarks around a short and penetrating passage from R. Abraham Isaac Kook’s *Orot Emunah (Lights of Faith)* and then renders it applicable to his generation. Taking Froman’s lead, I will extend his reading of Kook as the basis of my spiritual case for post-Zionism in the Diaspora.

Froman believed that the realm of the spiritual was the best path toward fostering human flourishing.

While Froman surely did not identify as a post-Zionist, he does mention post-Zionism numerous times in his writings (not in the essay below) and often in a positive light. Deeply committed to religious Zionism, Froman stayed solidly in

the Zionist orbit but, taking license from Kook's dialectical thinking, he was able to see the ways in which critique is itself born from within in order to push the limits of any ideology beyond itself to a new articulation.

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Regarding the crisis he witnessed in religious Zionism, Froman writes, "I feel in our time when Jewish nationalism—that is being expressed through Zionism—has also reached its limit, its power needs to be contained so that it too does not overextend its measure." What exactly does Froman mean here? Does he mean something close to what Avrum Burg suggests in his 2003 *Guardian* article that this may be the last Zionist generation? Unlikely. This was first published in 1998, after Yitzak Rabin's assassination but before the Second Intifada, in fact before the euphoria of Oslo had fully worn off. What is Froman's evidence of Zionism having reached its limit? Froman remained a believer in Greater Israel as a spiritual ideal but not necessarily a political one, and he claims elsewhere that the operative question of his community is how to deal with human freedom, as "this is the essence of Zionism."

The crisis of religious Zionism for him is thus not about history but about human will. What will Zionists do with freedom? While one cannot know for sure, in other writings Froman stresses the choice of politics over culture, jingoism over humanism, and land over spirituality as the widening crack in the "Golden Bowl," as Henry James might have put it, of Zionism, the imperfection that undermines its true merit. As a movement that was intended to establish Jewish sovereignty and freedom, in Froman's mind, Zionism in general, and religious Zionism in particular, had become a tool to control another people, thereby limiting their freedom and by extension, making Zionism itself an emblem of unfreedom. In effect, according to Froman Zionism was in danger of losing its moral foundations. In a 1995 op-ed in the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, "The Right To Stand," Froman wrote, "In school we were taught a formal principle that if a person wants to build his world (as beautiful as it may be) by means of destroying the world of another (as impoverished as it may be), this is 'the sin and its punishment.' The lesson one

learns from this is simple: It is forbidden for Jews to build their return to Zion (*shivat Zion*) at the price of the Arabs. It is forbidden for settlers to build their settlements—even if they are beautiful and rooted—in the midst of the destruction of the world of the Palestinians.”

Here and elsewhere Froman seems to echo sentiments of many in Brit Shalom and Ichud, two short-lived binational movements comprised of mostly German-Jewish intellectuals who advocated for a binational state and equal rights for Arab citizens. In an interview in May 1972 Gershom Scholem, who was for a time a member of Brit Shalom, remarked, “The Land of Israel belongs to two peoples, and these peoples need to find a way to live together ... and to work for a common future.” The aspiration for coexistence is quite common, among left and right, but the declaration that the land itself *belongs* to two peoples is a far more audacious claim, certainly for religious Zionists, that Froman seemed quite open to considering. In another essay in his volume, “Politics and Humanity: Can They Coexist?” Froman writes, “For my people I hope that nationalism will be expressed less through political means and more through cultural means. And one who, in any case, expresses their song of hope in that which exceeds the boundaries of Zionism—it is possible to respond that this is a claim to be a post-Zionist and not a pre-Zionist. And I would not recoil here in using the elder and great Hegel: It is possible to hope that the Jewish people will, in the future, succeed in building a synthesis of an intimate collective religious form of Judaism and a positive and passionate vision of Zionism.”

I wonder if there is a way for contemporary Israeli post-Zionism to fit into this formula of negation as a spiritual exercise, as a necessary preventative of the over-extension, and thus destructiveness, of present-day Zionism, especially religious Zionism, without necessarily adopting the totalizing view of a final synthesis as the necessary trajectory of all history. Kook was making a case for Zionism through its own force of negation, negating the ultra-traditional worldview that claimed Zionism was impossible. Can we formulate Kook’s equation in reverse? That is, as viewing post-Zionism as the instrument of Zionism’s over-extension. Perhaps we can posit that the over-reach for Froman may be viewed in the move

from a Greater Israel ideology in people such as Menachem Begin who still retained a humanistic side, or his predecessor Ze'ev Jabotinsky whose militarism was coupled with a deep humanism and belief in minority rights, to the radical religious Zionism (or is it neo-Zionism?) of people such as Naftali Bennett, Yizhak Ginsburgh, Moseh Levinger, or Moshe Feiglin whose Zionism appears to be void of humanism and a deep respect for the integrity of the other. And this too will be a stage with no obvious *aufheben*, or overcoming, of opposites. Froman appears committed to reinsert (religious/spiritual) humanism into the religious Zionist discourse, that is, *his* personal negation.

Whatever the case, Froman clearly felt that by 1998 religious Zionism had run its course, as indicated by its over-reaching and destructive side (whatever he meant that to be), and thus negation was inevitable. In an essay a couple of years earlier, in 1996, Froman quotes Uri Elizur who wrote in the settler journal *Nekudah*, “There is a contradiction between hating the Arabs and loving the land. We have to decide which of the two we want to choose.” Froman continues, “To be more specific, if the movement for the land is not successful in overcoming its weaknesses and does not realize that it must develop ties with the Palestinians, it will not succeed in building a country that can stand the pressure from the outside, and more importantly, from the inside.” From here we see Froman still believed the settler movement could succeed, but only by enacting its own negation of those destructive forces (“hating the Arab”) that were becoming dominant. Whether he felt religious Zionism could indeed pull itself back from the precipice where truth becomes falsity, I do not know.

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In today's Jewish Diaspora, rather than viewing the hegemony of Zionism as an example of its overextendedness, as Froman seems to do, (unlike Israelis, few American Jews actually experience or witness the oppressive nature of contemporary Zionism), many view Zionism as a requirement of Jewish identity. While Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi famously claimed in his *Zakhor* that in modernity, history has become the “religion of the fallen Jew,” today Zionism, or pro-

Israelism, has arguably become “the civil religion of the American Jew.” There is an old joke in America about “three-day Jews”; Jews who attend synagogue two days of Rosh Hashanah and one day Yom Kippur. I recently heard a new L.A. version; the “three dinner Jews.” Jews who go to the annual synagogue dinner, the Jewish Federation dinner, and the AIPAC dinner. Pro-Israelism has become an integral part of American Jewish civil religion. As a result, Zionism often functions as Jewish identity, sometimes as “Jewishness” itself, and as a litmus test that closes off all other alternatives.

I suggest that the overreaching of contemporary Diaspora Zionism is its hegemonic control of public Jewish discourse. This operates in numerous ways. Perhaps on the most base level it is the equation of non- or even anti- Zionism with anti-Semitism, a sure way to prevent any serious consideration of its position. More subtly, albeit along similar lines, it is the innate suspicion that any non-Zionist position is an attempt to destroy the State of Israel. This is simply not the case. Many non-Zionists, and many Diasporists, are not primarily focused on Israel. Or they are so largely to protest that the extent to which Israel gets to dictate the politics of the Jewish Diaspora. Rather, they are interested in creating a viable cultural, religious/spiritual, political, and moral case for Jewish life in the Diaspora without Israel at its center.

The hegemonic role of Zionism is not new to late-20th- and early-21st-century American Judaism. Its beginnings are rooted much earlier, arguably with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. For example, in her essay “To Save the Jewish Homeland,” published in 1948, Hannah Arendt wrote, “From the time of the Balfour declaration the loyal opposition in Zionist politics was constituted by the non-Zionists. But for all practical purposes the non-Zionist opposition longer exists today. This unfortunate development was encouraged, if not caused, by the fact that the United States and the United Nations finally endorsed an extremist Jewish demand that non-Zionists had always held to be totally unrealistic. With the support of a Jewish state by the great powers, the non-Zionists themselves believed themselves refuted by reality itself.” While Arendt is certainly correct that the reality of the state rendered non-Zionism (if we understand non-Zionism

simply as opposing the establishing of a state) a position that stood in opposition to reality, her lamentation is more about the ways in which the non-Zionist position offered a salient and relevant critique to some of the decisions being made early on about the nature of the state more than about the existence of the state, in particular regarding the return of Arab refugees after the 1948 War of Independence. Yet I would still argue that the weakening of non-Zionism after '48 has reached new heights in 21st-century America whereby non- and anti-Zionism is totally rejected as a kind of secular Jewish heresy the likes of which did not exist when Arendt wrote her essay.

Pro-Israelism has become an integral part of American Jewish civil religion.

My suggestion of an American post-Zionism is not to deny Zionism but to negate its hegemony in public discourse in order to free some Diaspora Jews from the confines of Zionism or pro-Israelism in order to encourage the development of new alternatives to Jewish life in the Diaspora. Zionism has functioned for most of its history as one among many Jewish alternatives. And while the destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel certainly thrust Zionism from the margin (where it was until the late 1930s in America) to the center of Jewish life, it did not necessarily mandate Zionism's hegemonic status for Diaspora Jews. The extent to which that is the case is, in fact, quite recent, beginning after 1967 (as Norman Podhoretz wrote in *Commentary Magazine*, "We are all Zionists now!") and gained ground with the rise and success of AIPAC and Jewish neo-Conservatism in the 1980s.

Kook legitimizes Zionism as the negation of the traditionalism that refuses to view Zionism's (heretical) negation of tradition as the inauguration of a new stage toward the messianic era. Froman adopts this to criticize the defects in religious Zionism, its disappearing humanism, its choice of politics over culture, as a way to view his critique as a new form of negation, one that will prevent religious Zionism's excesses from becoming destructive. The post-Zionist negation I propose here is informed by, but surely not identical to (either in structure or

substance), either Kook or Froman. And it is not really about Israel *per se* but about the role of Israel in the Diasporic imagination.

Unlike Kook or Froman, we do not need to proclaim that negation itself has only instrumental value. Its value is that, if implemented, it will break open the hegemonic nature of Zionism and enable other forms of identity formation to flourish in conjunction with Zionism. As a result of subverting the hegemonic and totalizing nature of Zionism in the Diaspora it can then begin to articulate a vision of identity that is not subservient to the Zionist narrative of “negation of the exile.” It will resist the totalizing nature of one form of Jewishness, i.e., Zionism (this, I claim, is Diaspora Zionism’s present state of overreaching) while allowing Zionism to remain and develop (the “post” retains that which it reaches beyond). Finally, it will be healthy for Zionism in that it will be released from the burden of all totalizing concepts; it will not have to be all things to all people. It will be kept honest by being confronted with resistance and a call to clarify its positions.

Rabbi Menachem Froman was a man of extraordinary courage and conviction. From deep within the recesses of the Zionist orbit he cracked open the tightly woven binary between right and left in Israel by arguing for humanism while maintaining that there is an unbreakable theological connection between the Jewish people and *Eretz Yisrael*. While his practical solutions may not satisfy one interested in public policy, his vision of saving religious Zionism from over-extension by exposing its destructive tendencies is noteworthy. In this he shared much with Kook, although Kook remained far more theoretical even than Froman who, even given his spiritual inclinations, lived amidst a radicalizing settler movement and had to respond to the daily challenges of occupation. Both viewed resistance and negation as a spiritual exercise that served both a preventative and constructive purpose. Jews living in the Diaspora can learn much from them, not so much about the value or obligation to live in Israel (where Diaspora Jews choose not to live) but about the dignity and importance of living spiritually engaged lives in the Diaspora alongside, but not necessarily auxiliary to, the State of Israel.

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#MENACHEM BEGIN   #NAFTALI BENNETT   #OCCUPIED TERRITORIES  
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