

Love and Liberation: Encountering the Other in the Poetry and Theology of Rav Menachem Froman

Freedom and the Self

1. Rav Menachem Froman, *Hasidim Tsohakim Mizeh*, trans. Levi Morrow & Ben Greenfield, §3

In my eyes, the spiritual projects of the Zohar and of Rebbe Naḥman are actually the same: to move us from the world of facts into the world of abundance.

You can see the world as composed of facts – a house, people, some mountains, and so on. Or you can see the world not as something standing on its own, but as a river of divine flow. As abundance that streams out from the divine.

This divine abundance appears in its best form in the structure of generations: the father, the son, a grandchild. The stream of generations. If you stop this abundance by not marrying, you cut off the stream. This is why the Zohar sees being single as The Sin, with a capital T.

Generally speaking, people understand marriage as a kind of prison. When you're single, you're free, you can do whatever you wish. Marriage means taking responsibility for life. It's a kind of obligation that restricts my freedom.

However, you can see this too in the exact opposite light. Yes, the single person has control of his life. He decides. He determines what he'll do today and what he'll do tomorrow. When you marry, you lose control. Any minute, my wife might call and tell me to do something. I don't have control of my life. When I lose control, I am swept into the river of divine overflow that is this world – and then, I am truly free. I give up on the I that decides and chooses and, in its place... I flow, I flow and live.

Everyone thinks that being free means being "Me." But in my life experience, the primary chains holding me back are my internal chains. My self-definitions. When I liberate myself from myself, that's when I am truly free. Which is why "it was the way of our teacher, Rebbe Naḥman, to never insist on anything." I don't take a stand on my preferences. Just flow.

Getting married – as the all jokes say – is like committing suicide, like going to sleep. Finally being free

2. *Hasidim Tsohakim Mizeh* §166

Freud and the Zohar say essentially the same thing. They share a fundamental sense that the foundation of everything is hidden, unrevealed, concealed. The primary aspect of a person, what motivates him, is his unconscious. The primary aspect of the world is the concealed light. As opposed to the revealed light, originating in the sun and created on the fourth day,

this is the light of the first day, which was concealed, like the foundations of a building covered with soil, like silver hidden beneath floor tiles...

A person's task is to uncover these foundations, to interact with them. For Freud, this happens on the psychologist's couch. For the Zohar, this happens when a righteous person gets up at midnight, when there is no sun, and lays the concealed light bare into the darkness by studying the hidden Torah.

For both of them, this hidden foundation is the power of the right side. Eros is what drives the individual person. The coupling of God and the *Shekhinah* sustains the world.

However, this revealing must specifically happen in the dark, while it is still night, with modesty. The concealed light remains concealed. It is revealed through study, but it remains hidden. This is why not everyone can learn Zohar, only modest individuals. This is in contrast to rabbis who teach Zohar without checking who is attending the class... In my day, if a yeshiva student was reading books about Krishnah or the Illiad, even if they were the primary structure of his spirituality, he did so at night, under the blanket, so the supervisor wouldn't see... Today everything is out in the open, on the tables in the study hall... **The modest revelation is the secret of the Zohar.**

Prayer and the Other

3. "An Introduction for Prayer as Well," *Accounting for Madness*, 73

Once, a non-Jew came before Hillel,
And asked to be taught the entire Torah on one foot.
He told him the general principle: Love your fellow as
yourself.

מְעֵשָׂה בְּגוֹי אֶחָד שֶׁבָּא לִפְנֵי הִלֵּל,
וּבְקִשׁוֹ שֶׁיִּלְמְדוּ אֶת כָּל הַתּוֹרָה עַל רֶגֶל אַחַת.
אָמַר לוֹ אֵת הַכֹּלֵל: וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ.

הַקְדָּמָה גַּם לְתַפְלָה

The other is my hell
This is the only thing
That to me is simple and so clear
That I don't need to explain
Or add to it
That the other is also my only refuge
From this hell
Of mine.

הָאֲחֵר הוּא הַגְּהֵינוּם שְׁלִי
זֶה הַדְּבָר הַיִּחִיד
שְׁלִי הוּא פְּשוּט וּבָרוּר כָּל-כָּף
שְׁאִין לִי מָה לְפָרֵשׁ
אוֹ לְהוֹסִיף עָלָיו דְּבָר
שֶׁהָאֲחֵר הוּא גַּם הַמְּקַלֵּט הַיִּחִיד
מִן הַגְּהֵינוּם
שְׁלִי.

4. "A Matched Pair," *Accounting for Madness*, 61

	זו לעצמת זו
You don't understand	
How alone I am.	את אינך מבינה
You don't see it all	כמה אני בודד.
The emptiness	את אינך רואה את כל
The lies	הריק
And the nothingnesses.	השקרים
You love me.	והאפסיות.
	את אוהבת אותי.
I understand me.	אני מבין אותי
I alone	אני לבדי
I see,	אני רואה,
Therefore, I do not.	לכן, אני לא.

Love, the Land, and the Other in the Land

5. "Song of the Soil," *Accounting for Madness*, 33¹

	שירת האדמה
If it is really me that you love	
Why are you so attached	אם באמת אותי תאהב
To the financial contract that blinds your eyes	מדוע בדבקות כזאת אתה אוחז
And conceals from you the road	בשטר הכסף המעורר עיניים
That leads to me	ונסתרה ממך הדרך
	לבוא אלי.

6. *Hasidim Tsohakim Mizeh* §133

Settling the land can be an expression of love for the soil and commitment to it, but it can also be a crushing, aggressive act of conquest. As Zionists, we sang, "We'll dress you in a gown of concrete and cement" (Nathan Alterman, "Morning Song"). Are the asphalt roads and concrete buildings how a lover clothes his beloved in a beautiful garment? Or are they a prison outfit for the soil?

I remember one of the first marches that Gush Emunim organized for the Shomron after the Six Day War. They presented a display with a vision for the future of the Shomron: highways full of cars because of how many settlers there are. I stood there with my friend Professor Yehuda Liebes and he said to me, "Have we gone mad? This is what we want? To replace a narrow,

¹ Previously published in *Adam Min Ha'arets*, 51.

beautiful road between these hills with a fast road that will block the view?" It's not always easy to distinguish between loving the land and strangling it.

7. *Hasidim Tsohakim Mizeh* §45

The whole point of the Land of Israel is that you nullify yourself into it; it nullifies you. "The land devours its inhabitants" (Numbers 13:32). Nullifying into the land is attaching yourself to the *Shekhinah*.

What's the difference between a Jew inside the land and a Jew in the diaspora? A Jew in the diaspora has to take a stand against everything that surrounds him. He must not assimilate.

A Jew in the land simply nullifies himself into the earth. We assimilate, we are swallowed into it.

8. *Sahaki Arets*, 136, 142, 175

Generally speaking, the Left represents a "modern" and "Western" way of thinking, while the "Greater Land of Israel" represents a "traditional" and "primitive" line of thought. This is why Leftists look down on partisans of the Greater Land of Israel. This is why Western countries accepted the Left's peace plan. However, as a primitive, religious Jew, connected to the soil of the land which God gave to his fathers, I can testify: This is also why the connection between Greater Land of Israel partisans and the Palestinians has so much potential! They too are generally religious, or are at least very connected to tradition, people, and soil. The only thing disrupting this connection is xenophobia. Primitive people generally express their connection to their people through hating the other people—and certainly through hating the son of that people who makes war against them. So it is for the Palestinians, and so it is for our Jews. Many of the Greater Land of Israel partisans—particularly given our current cultural climate [originally published June 1996 –LM], when they feel attacked and denigrated by the Left—protect themselves with a thick layer of stubbornness and isolationism...

Someone who defines themselves as connected on a fundamental level to the soil could be called "primitive." We could also claim that someone who lives in a "*šummud*" relationship to their land is not free (just as a tree does not easily move from place to place). But if we want to find ways to make peace with such a person, we must recognize and respect his self-definition. This is why I concluded that those Israelis who live the connection of a person to the soil are so important for peace. To speak more clearly: It is exactly the settlers who could bridge between the Jewish people and the Palestinian people. Or to use a more poetic formulation, one I have repeated over the years: The settlements could be the fingers of the Israeli hand reaching out in peace—and the word "fingers" bears connotations of close contact and sensitivity...

The beauty of the primitive person comes through in the way they cannot in any sense claim to possess absolute ideological truth. It's so clear that they cannot stand the text of objective ideology that they are liberated from this test. They are a pure subjectivity, one with itself. It is not a spirit conquering the flesh or an absolute imprinting its form into matter. The natural person is just one thing existing in nature. Naturalness, oneness, and liberation—this is what makes them so charismatic...

9. *Ten Li Zeman*, 132, 140–141

The Maharal's words [about matsah as poor man's bread because it is simple, unsophisticated, etc.] connect to what the academic study of religions says about religion's tendency to preserve early, primitive tools within its rituals (*matsah* – early bread; the *sukkah* – an early house; the *shofar* – a primitive musical instrument).

To me, this is religion's strong point. Many people (perhaps primarily religious people) often point to the riches and sophistication of the Jewish religion: the abundance of commentaries, exegetical homilies, liturgical poetry, the vast ocean of Talmudic literature, the medieval and modern commentators, and the plentiful varieties of philosophers, kabbalists, and thinkers. This is all undoubtedly correct, but perhaps the most essential part of Judaism is its primitive aspect, where a rich, sophisticated person connects to the basic, primitive part of his personality...

The way each side sees its way of thinking as natural and obvious closes them in on themselves. Open dialogue, never mind mutual understanding, gets farther and farther away. [...] Perhaps the path to Jewish normalcy goes by way of abnormal ideas. For example (to suggest a product of this Jew's abnormal thinking), the idea that the Jewish world which sees this land as its ancient homeland and its modern destiny does not necessarily contradict the Palestinian world that see this land as the refreshing cradle of its birth. For example, perhaps peace will not come about through the mutual contraction of two cultural worlds, but through their expansion and sublimation.

10. "A Hosh'a'nah for Our Time," *Accounting for Madness*, 129²

He and I
And a whole land tearing
Between his wanderings
And his hold on this sand
In this heat
He melts into the rocks
And I am cast into astonishment
What is this
Connecting the hard cliffs
And the deep path
Of mine through the belly of the wadi
Certainly there is something like
A play
A heat wave crossing this great, awesome,
desert
A land of burning and thirst
To the place
Where the parallel lines of the banks of wadi
Connect like in the stories and my witnesses
Are the bleached skies
And the boiling land
That one day in one wadi's belly I was
One flesh with stone
Between high cliffs and bleached blue
Connected without end
He and I
Please save

*After encountering a Bedouin in the Judean desert
during Holy Hamo'ed Sukkot*

הושענא לזמננו
אני והוא
וארץ שלמה גזרת
בין נדודיו
לבין אחיזתו בחול הנה
בחם הנה
הוא מתך אל הפלעים
ואני מוטח אל ההשתוממות
מה נה
מחבר בין המצוקים הקשים
ואת השביל העמק
שלי בבטן הרפה של הנאדי
נדאי יש מה כמו
מחנה
שרב לעבר את המדבר הגדול והנורא הנה
ארץ שרף וצמאון
אל המקום
ששם הקוים המקבילים של גדות הנאדי
מתחברים כמו באגדות ועדי
הם השמים המלבנים
והארץ הרוחת
שיום אחד בבטן נאדי אחד הייתי
בשר אחד עם אבן
בין מצוקים גבהים ותכלת מלבנת
מחברים בלא תכלית
אני והוא
הושיעה נא

לאחר פגישה עם הבדואי במדבר יהודה בחול המועד סוכות

² Previously published in *Adam Min Ha'arets*, 68.