

## *Book Review*

*A Jewish Quest for Religious Meaning*, by NORMAN E. FRIMER  
(Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1993)

Reviewed by  
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The profound questions of religion are the perennial ones. Emerging out of the very nature of being, they remain relevant always. Still, some questions press themselves upon us more relentlessly in one era than in another, not because they become inherently more difficult but because cultural conditions and historical events make them more salient. Rabbi Norman E. Frimer *zt"l* keenly grasped the major religious issues of our time. He recognized their eternal relevance as well as their contemporary character. One of the pioneering Orthodox rabbis involved in campus work through the Bnai Brith Hillel Foundations, he devoted not only his personal life, but also his professional activity to elaborating his positions on these issues, articulating their interconnections, pursuing their implications in every corner of life, and sharing his insights with his colleagues and students. Dr. Frimer's most important essays are brought together in this book.

The volume opens where any honest book on religion must: with theology. Religion, after all, is essentially an assertion about life's core meaning. The ontological claim comes first; everything else depends on it. Frimer's first three essays address the ways in which contemporary Jews tend to understand and relate to God, and they are unusual essays indeed. What is so valuable in his theological writing is that he appreciates that God is an eternal presence: loving, choosing, commanding, calling, and responding in turn. At the same time, he fully comprehends and is vexed by all of the intellectual problems that bedevil theological thought, and, with characteristic integrity, he flees from none of them. However, he recognizes that a basic ontological choice must be made, and he chooses, in Pascal's famous phrase, "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not the God of the philosophers and the scientists."

Most attributes of human character are continuous. A person is more or less honest, more or less compassionate, more or less energetic, more or less reflective, more or less observant, more or less traditional. By contrast, the fundamental religious claim is dichotomous: either ulti-

macy has meaning, or it is random. It cannot be partly, or somewhat, or rather meaningful. Either it is meaningful, or it is not. If ultimacy is meaningful, then human life is inherently meaningful, its significance implied by the larger meaning of all existence. If ultimacy is random, then the meaning of human life is not inherent, but rather part cultural artifact and part individual decision. Religion claims that ultimacy (that is, Ultimacy) is meaningful, and the implications of that assertion are pervasive.

The gap between being religious and not being religious is, thus, an unbridgeable chasm, not a matter of "more or less." If we accept that human life is ultimately, inherently meaningful (in other words, if we believe in God), then religion must be the ground in which all truth and value are rooted, and it commands our total life. If we do not so believe, then our standards and criteria for validity and value reside elsewhere, and religion provides only a collection of pretty but secondary verbal and behavioral metaphors. Frimer understands the starkly dichotomous nature of the ontological issue: either there is God or there is not, and the honest recognition that there is God utterly transforms our approach to everything. His essays show how recent attempts to formulate religion without the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob leave us, in the end, with no religion at all.

Frimer also, and perhaps even more consequentially for our generation, shows how the religious position does not require us to leave today's world, either altogether through "ghettoization" or intermittently through "compartmentalization." His mastery of modern culture enables him to explain how traditional Judaism addresses contemporary concerns without asking us either to deny what we have learned or to renounce the cognitive and analytic capabilities that we have come to prize.

This brings us to epistemology. While ontology's fundamental religious issue is dichotomous, epistemology's decidedly is not. It sometimes appears to people unfamiliar with religious thought that acceptance of religion entails the sacrifice of reason and its utter replacement by revealed texts as the source of true knowledge. People who know religion are aware, of course, that revelation's claim does not banish the mind or abolish our need to rely on it. Both reason and revelation are the tools of religious knowledge, and our sharpest theological controversies today are about their precise nature and relationship: exactly what was revealed, how human experience helps us to understand the meaning of what was revealed, what part of that revelation is eternal, as opposed to cultural and, therefore, perhaps temporal, what, if anything,

of value there is to be learned outside the texts of revelation together with their accompaniments and derivatives, and finally, how we are to arrive at legitimate positions on these questions and on the behavior which these positions imply.

These issues are not new, but in our day they have become the major lines of fissure within religion. As differences in ontology divide the religious from the secularists, differences in epistemology separate the religious from one another. If we examine what distinguishes the “movements” as well as what differentiates Orthodoxy’s “wings,” in terms of religious philosophy alone, ignoring for the moment the many psychological and sociological factors that make religious groups what they are, we see the epistemological options in their rich variety and complexity.

Rabbi Frimer recognizes that Judaism—as every religion which claims a revelation—gives primacy to its revelation. Still, Frimer’s work demonstrates his belief that our minds, created by God, are good and should be used, unfettered, to understand His world and His will. He reminds us that everyday acts become mitzvot when they are done in behavioral and intentional obedience to the *Metsave*. Analogously, he shows us how all knowledge, cognitive as well as experiential, scientific as well as humanistic, can become religiously relevant when it is made to yield better understanding of God’s creation in all its aspects and dimensions, its stability and its dynamism, its current condition and its potential fulfillment. Especially in our day, when the walls which compartmentalize life are being fortified from both the left and the right, Frimer calls us to integration and, more important, shows empirically by example how his kind of wholeness can enrich the mind and elevate the spirit. Reading his work, we get the sense of a single reality, even though it is multifaceted and complex. We see people as integrated and coherent beings, even though they are multidimensional and, often, paradoxical. While the core of truth is in the Divine–human relationship and in what the loving God revealed to us, still there is much of worth to be learned from all human experience.

Frimer’s epistemology also shapes his analysis of the situation of Jewish university students and his approach to strengthening their commitment to Judaism, the task which was at the center of most of his professional career. He appreciates that contemporary Western culture is not unmitigated idolatry, but rather a complex mixture of ideas, values, and norms, each of which has multiple facets and nuances. For Rabbi Frimer, commitment to Judaism requires not encapsulation, but rather the exercise of judgment in making fine discriminations, identify-

ing those elements of Western culture which can be mobilized in Judaism's cause, those which should be rejected or even fought, and those which can be transformed to yield their potential, if yet unrealized, good. Frimer wanted to give his students the ability to make those discriminations, the desire to rest them on Judaism's collected wisdom, the courage to follow through on their implications, and the conviction to believe that doing so puts a person in tune with what is ultimately good and true. He examines university life, recognizing in it the crystallization and articulation of the larger culture's impact. He insists that the only appropriate and effective Jewish response is not to attempt escape from its challenges, but, rather, to confront them with sophisticated knowledge and informed faith. Here, as elsewhere, what Frimer wrote decades ago remains resonant today, not because the world is unchanged, but because he knew what was profound and abiding.

Compared to ontology or epistemology, it is teleology which is most salient on the street and, as a result, probably most consequential. Most people in contemporary Western culture are, despite their occasional religious practices and memberships, essentially secular in outlook. For them, the central question, implicitly if not explicitly, is pragmatic: what difference does being religious make? If religion makes people "better," it is, they conclude, worthwhile. Otherwise, religion is seen as a harmless entertainment at best, a dangerous diversion at worst.

On average, the level of adherence to religion's standards of interpersonal relations is, in fact, probably higher among those who also practice the norms of ritual observance, and there are, of course, sterling examples of people who exercise great care in both categories of behavior. However, there are opposite examples as well, and, sadly, it is they who are often more widely known or closer at hand. Everyone knows someone who is much more careful about ritual than about meeting the needs and safeguarding the feelings of others.

Much of the disparity between ritual exactness and ethical precision results from human frailty, but there is another consideration that must enter the analysis as well. Human behavior never rests on a single motive. People choose to live traditionally observant lives for many reasons, and each person's reasons constitute a unique combination of factors. The heavier the weight of intrinsic commitment to Judaism's beliefs, values, and law, the greater will be the attempt to implement the full range of mitsvot, both *ben adam la-Makom* and *ben adam la-havero*. The heavier the weight of social and psychological motives, the greater will be the emphasis on the mitsvot which somehow serve those

motives, along with the comparative disregard of mitsvot which are by all accounts equally important but which do not respond to what actually drives such religious observance.

Norman Frimer consistently and insistently weaves theology, morality, and spirituality together. His essays trace the route from theological tenets to their ethical implications and that route's extension from ethical injunctions to their detailed specification and nuanced application. He shows, for example, how monotheism implies the sanctity of human life, how Israel's election carries an imperative to set the highest moral example, and how the Shabbat precludes exploitation of other people. Rabbi Frimer always emphasizes that the notions of *kiddush Hashem* and *hillul Hashem* confer extra responsibility on people who present themselves as observant of God's will. In addition to mapping the direct route between theology and morality, his essays also allow us to glimpse how high a soul moving back and forth along that route can soar. Rabbi Frimer makes his point sometimes explicitly, sometimes indirectly through the foci and style of his scholarly studies and professional work. Finally, and movingly, he teaches us through the personal example of his frightening days as a hostage and of his and his family's special way of making his release from that terrifying experience an occasion for religious celebration. What comes through every section of the book, with its interplay between the ideas it conveys and the life it portrays, is how being truly religious transforms life, in all of its facets, for good.

Norman Frimer offers a way out of the confusion and conflict which beset so much of contemporary life. It is a way which begins and ever resides in religion, which uses every human capacity to draw lessons from every human experience and thus wastes none of God's gifts, and which reaches every corner of being. His essays convince us that, while the popularity of his approach may wax and wane, its validity transcends changing fashions and emphases in religion. *A Jewish Quest for Religious Meaning* is the worthy legacy of a great mind and a great spirit to the people he loved.

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