
Totem and Tefillin

The Jewish World of Sigmund Freud: Essays on Cultural Roots and the Problem of Religious Identity

Edited by Arnold D. Richards

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What would the history of psychoanalysis look like if Sigmund Freud had not been so very ambivalent about his Jewishness? What if he had been closer in spirit to, for instance, his Viennese neighbor Theodor Herzl, who abandoned his prescription for the wholesale conversion of the Jews in favor of championing an independent Jewish state? These are some of the questions addressed in *The Jewish World of Sigmund Freud: Essays on Cultural Roots and the Problem of Religious Identity*, a compilation of papers edited by Arnold D. Richards and presented at a conference commemorating Freud's 150th birthday in 2006. Freud's antipathy to religious belief and practice is well documented, both anecdotally and in his writings; nonetheless, the nature and origins of his conflicted Jewish identity, as well as its impact

on his work, have received very little scholarly attention by classical psychoanalysts and historians. *The Jewish World of Sigmund Freud* seeks to fill this gap.

Although Freud's controversial views on women have been the subject of numerous scholarly works, his arguably even more complicated relationship with Judaism has garnered hardly a fraction of the attention. Of course, Freud's disavowal of his Jewishness may help to explain the fog surrounding the issue: Was he or was he not well versed in Jewish tradition? Could he or could he not read Hebrew? In the preface to the Hebrew translation of his book *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, published a few years before his death, Freud conjures up an imaginary reader who observes that the author has distanced himself utterly from his heritage, and wonders what, if anything, about him remains Jewish at all—to which Freud answers: "A very great deal, and probably its very essence." Encouraging, yes, but on what was his confidence based?

Freud's feelings toward Judaism derived, in large part, from

his view of religion in general, and probably vice versa. To understand his thinking on religion, we need to look to those of his works devoted to the subject, starting with the controversial *Totem and Taboo*, published in 1913. In an effort to trace the roots of religious belief, Freud here appropriates the theory of the “primal horde,” a purported anthropological/historical account of the dawn of civilization. At a certain historical turning point, he explains, a group of rebellious sons joined together to murder their oppressive father, the fear of whom had held them all in thrall. Afterward they literally consumed him in a totemic meal that Freud argues was the “first festival.” But the brothers realized soon enough that hatred was not the only thing they felt toward their father; they also loved and respected him. Eventually, the guilt they felt on account of his murder was expiated by their voluntary assumption of the very paternal prohibitions (e.g., incest) against which they had originally protested.

Also in *Totem and Taboo*, Freud outlines the evolution of human understanding of the universe, which he argues is repeated anew in the stages of individual psychological development. In the beginning, he explains, primitive man held to an “animistic” worldview, and believed that all things, animate and inanimate, were endowed with a soul. In

children, animism manifests itself as a sense of omnipotence, in which there is scarcely a distinction between internal and external, subjective and objective; notably, this same lack of differentiation characterizes psychotic adults. In the second, “religious” stage, omnipotence is transferred to the gods, just as children confer power on their parents. Though admittedly more advanced than the previous one, this phase, too, was nonetheless regarded by Freud as infantile, or developmentally arrested. The third and highest stage is the “scientific” one, in which omnipotence is relinquished altogether, and the relative insignificance and mortality of human beings is acknowledged, even as faith in the power of human reason is affirmed.

In *Future of an Illusion* (1927), Freud expounds on the distinctions between science and fantasy. The former he regarded as the most accurate means of acquiring knowledge of the reality outside ourselves, the latter as an infantile wish fulfillment that constitutes the wellspring of religious inspiration. To Freud, religious systems make our unpredictable lives bearable, much like the parent who tries to soothe an overwrought child: Both offer a sense of security, and attempt to allay our fears. Moreover, Freud notes, the religious constitution of a moral

code allegedly secures the attainment of justice, while belief in an afterlife extends one's earthly existence into eternity, thus denying the finality of death. Despite their practical benefit, however, religious doctrines were to Freud mere illusions, and religious documents dismissed as lacking evidentiary basis. Like any obsessive neurosis, religion, he believed, imposes oppressive restrictions on its adherents and fosters unrealistic expectations—a situation “such as we find in an isolated form nowhere else but in amentia, in a state of blissful hallucinatory confusion.” In its systematic inculcation, Freud concludes, religion prohibits the free range of thought, thereby opposing the “primacy of the intellect” that is the basic premise of science.

Moses and Monotheism (1939) is Freud's last book, completed shortly before his death in London. In this strangely unsettling work, Freud extends the domain of applied psychoanalysis into biblical territory. This time, however, his criticism of religion is directed against not only its infantile foundations, but also the scriptural account. Freud knowingly plays the role of provocateur: In the chapter “Moses an Egyptian,” he opens with the disclaimer that to “deprive a people of the man whom they take pride in as the greatest of

their sons is not a thing to be gladly or carelessly undertaken, least of all by someone who is himself one of them.” But just as many years earlier, in the face of vigorous opposition, Freud unflinchingly took up the self-appointed task of revealing the power of unconscious life and of infantile sexuality, so here does he take on the thankless role of dispeller of illusions and sacred untruths.

While in *Future of an Illusion* Freud informed us that religious doctrines in general are unsubstantiated, in turning his analytic sights on Moses he sought to subvert the cardinal credos of Judaism and to expose the dark underside that the biblical narrative tries to conceal. The result is a radically different version of the events described in the book of Exodus: Moses, maintained Freud, was not an Israelite, but an Egyptian, who recruited a band of Semites who proved receptive to Egyptian-based monotheism (introduced, as it were, by Pharaoh Akhenaten). Furthermore, concealed in the biblical account is the murder of Moses by a group of his followers, the guilt for which has plagued the Jews throughout the generations (not to mention incurring the wrath of other peoples as well). In short, in Freud's retelling the story of Exodus becomes another variation on the primal-horde theory of the foundation of civilizations—and little else.

More than any of his books on religion, *Moses and Monotheism* lays bare the intense ambivalence and irresolution at the heart of Freud's Jewish identity. On the one hand, he treats biblical historiography as yet another example of concealment and denial; on the other hand, he extols the "evidence of the presence of a particular psychic aptitude" demonstrated by the Jewish people, who pioneered the idea of an abstract, immaterial god. These achievements, Freud insists, brought the Jews to a higher spiritual plane, and paved the way for the "primacy of the intellect," the prime mover in the scientific search for truth. Unsurprisingly, with this legacy Freud is more than happy to claim kinship, presenting psychoanalysis as its true heir.

The *Jewish World of Sigmund Freud* offers a wide prism through which to view its subject, even if the fourteen essays of which it is composed vary in their relevance, cogency, and lucidity. Yet like pieces in a patchwork quilt, the different elements of Freud's Jewish experience considered here—from family background to the sociology of turn-of-the-century Jewish Vienna to more speculative forays into the process of psychological synthesis—all combine to enlarge our understanding of his creativity and the complexity of his

thinking.

In many respects, Freud was a typical Viennese Jew. He was raised in Leopoldstadt, the city's Jewish quarter, and he studied in a gymnasium, an elite secular-humanist school whose student body was largely Jewish. Like other upwardly mobile Jews of their time, Freud's parents saw education as the most direct route to their son's acculturation. In "Being Mr. Somebody: Freud and Classical Education," Richard H. Armstrong describes the mission of the gymnasium as fostering the ideal of *Bildung* (self-cultivation) by means of *Altertumswissenschaft*, the German embrace of the culture and language of ancient Greece and Rome. Armstrong speculates that a classical education served as a homogenizing agent for ambitious Jewish students, at the same time as its pagan theme of unfettered self-expression operated as a countercurrent to the prevailing Christian culture. If, as Armstrong suggests, Freud turned to the classical world to distance himself from mainstream culture, he also succeeded in distancing himself from his Jewish heritage.

In "Hidden in Plain Sight: Freud's Jewish Identity Revisited," Jill Salberg contrasts the then-popular gentile stereotypes of physically active men and homebound women with the tra-

ditional Jewish images of cloistered, sedentary men who study Torah all day while their wives go out to work. As recounted in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), the young Freud found his father's Jewish mannerisms shameful and "unheroic." Early on, Freud sought out alternative role models in ancient history, such as the towering figure of Hannibal. And though his mother idolized him as her "goldener Sigi," she, too, according to Salberg, posed a problem for her son, who experienced her as an overbearing maternal force insufficiently attenuated by paternal strength. Thus did Jewish and feminine identity become permanently conflated—and denigrated—in Freud's psyche. A well-known story that attests to this observation is that on the first Friday night of their married life, Freud prevented his wife Martha Bernays from lighting the Shabbat candles—an action that peremptorily stifled attempts at both Jewish *and* female self-expression.

In "Assimilation and Affirmation: The Jews of Freud's Vienna," Marsha L. Rozenblitt highlights the tripartite identity of Austrian Jews, who staunchly guarded their Austro-Hungarian political loyalty, German cultural affinity, and Jewish ethnic heritage. It is possible that this multivalent identity, shot through with

polarities and binaries, eventually emerged in the Freudian tripartite psychic structure of id, ego, and superego. Undoubtedly, the spirits of amalgamation, assimilation, factionalism, and divergence were in the air of turn-of-the-century Vienna—a source of stress and conflict for its Jews, but also, perhaps, an incentive for creative syntheses. Steven Beller, in "Freud's Jewish World: A Historical Perspective," characterizes the Central-European Jewish experience as a "pluralistic dialectic between universalist unity and particularist difference." Indeed, the eternal tension between inclusion and exclusion, affiliation and separateness, was heightened by the challenge of Jewish self-definition and survival in that particular time and place.

The negative exceptionalism of the Jews so common then—exemplified by the prevalent psychiatric belief that their race was biologically predisposed to mental illness—was, according to Sander L. Gilman in "Sigmund Freud and Electrotherapy," a primary factor in Freud's determination that psychoanalysis achieve universal status, and escape relegation to a "Jewish science." Yet as Harold P. Blum argues in "Antisemitism in the Freud Case Histories," an unsettling repercussion of this resolution was Freud's suppression, if not actual expurgation, of any

hint of the “Jewish experience” from his case material. Given that most of Freud’s patients were Jewish, the absence of a discussion of this experience is striking—and particularly by such a master analyst, one accustomed to reading between the lines. A notable exception, writes Blum, is a footnote to the case of Little Hans, in which Freud hypothesizes that the unconscious parallel between circumcision and castration is a crucial source of antisemitism. (In *Moses and Monotheism*, however, he argued that the roots of this hatred lie in the Jews’ denial of their murder of Moses.)

Understandably, *Moses and Monotheism* occupies a central place in this anthology, tempting as it is to see in it the key to understanding Freud’s view of Judaism. In “Freud’s Theory of Jewishness: For Better and for Worse,” Eliza Slavet uses her reading of the book to point to Freud’s cherry-picking approach to Jewish Scripture, history, and tradition. We see this, for example, in his insistence—contrary to accepted wisdom—that Judaism is transmitted not via education and direct influence, but rather through vestigial memories of a shared history, in particular a common crime (the murder of Moses). Carrying such a collective burden has both advantages and drawbacks: On the one hand, Freud argued that the Jews must acknowledge their participation

in the universal history of the primal horde, based as it is on murder and sacrifice. On the other hand, in their singular embrace of monotheism and their rejection of the material and magical foundations of primitive religions, the Jews spearheaded religion’s emergence from the realm of sensory perception into one based on abstraction and internalization. For psychoanalysis, this was nothing less than foundational: Through their invention of the invisible God, the Jews paved the way for the discovery of the unconscious.

In these claims we begin to see an acceptance of sorts, even a grudging pride, on the part of Freud toward his Jewish identity. But of course, one cannot understand this change without taking historical reality into account: In 1933, Freud’s “Jewish” books were burned in town squares; in 1938, in the wake of the Anschluss, Freud and his family fled Austria for London, where *Moses and Monotheism* was written. Amidst the tidal wave of Jew-hatred sweeping Europe in the late 1930s, Freud may have felt compelled to acknowledge his Jewish roots in a new way. Is it any wonder, then, that he sought to link Jewish cultural achievements to those of psychoanalysis? This connection, after all, allowed him not only to wear his Jewishness as a badge of honor, but also to offer

some explanation for the stubborn persistence of antisemitism.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the intellectual and cultural significance of Freud's thought, and from the outset—like all powerful movements—Freudian psychoanalysis has had its cultish adherents. The near canonization of Freud and his ideas has made it difficult for his successors to adopt an objective stance toward his work—one that neither idealizes the founding father nor attempts to perform a theoretical patricide. The perpetual replay of the Oedipal drama in man's cultural and organizational life was anticipated by Freud himself in *Future of an Illusion*, in which he has an imaginary antagonist argue: "If you want to expel religion from our European civilization, you can only do it by means of another system of doctrines, and such a system would from the outset take over all the psychological characteristics of religion—the same sanctity, rigidity, and intolerance, the same prohibitions of thought—for its own defense." The psychoanalytic movement created new possibilities for understanding the human experience, but in the process of positioning itself as a new "-ism," it, too, became subject to the same distortions, abuses, and stultifications that threaten all established systems.

While the Oedipus complex remains the backbone of Freudian psychoanalysis, the greatest post-Freudian advance has been the exploration of the earliest, pre-verbal period of life (referred to by psychoanalysts as the pre-Oedipal period). Post-Freudian psychoanalysts (most notably Melanie Klein, Michael Balint, and D.W. Winnicott) came to understand that this early stage of life, dismissed by Freud as the objectionably "primitive" and "infantile" origin of religious experience, is in reality the lifelong source of personal meaning and vitality for us all. This is the matrix in which the invaluable capacities for illusion, belief, trust, and hope—all central to religious experience—germinate. From another angle, Hans Loewald, probably Freud's greatest interpreter, argued that in the process of psychic growth, earlier and more primitive experience is not simply outgrown or replaced by later development (as Freud believed), but is actually recombined and reconfigured at higher levels of psychic organization. These innovative perspectives on the part of Freud's followers, especially regarding the significance of "primitive" experience (although not specifically addressed in this volume), offer a post-Freudian frame of reference in which religion can be studied as a cultural achievement rather than repudiated as an

expression of group psychopathology. In other words, with post-Freudian humility, we might acknowledge that if religion is predicated on non-empirical belief, so too is the unconscious, whose power can never be proven empirically or examined directly.

The editor and authors of the essays in *The Jewish World of Sigmund Freud* are to be commended for opening the door to a critical assessment of Freud's views on religion in general and Judaism in particular. As many of the essays illustrate, in spite of Freud's disparaging view of religion, much of his thinking and writing is suffused with "Jewishness"—perhaps that "essence" he himself invoked in his preface to the Hebrew edition of *Totem and Taboo*. His debt to the tradition centers on, but does not end with, the connection he draws in *Moses and Monotheism* between the development of psychoanalysis and the Jews' successful abstraction and internalization of faith. The Jewish imprint is unmistakable in other aspects of psychoanalysis, too: As Beller observes, the Bible's presentation of a dialogical (I-Thou) relationship between God and man is mirrored in Freud's creation of a psychoanalytic therapy that relies on verbal exchange between analyst and patient. The interplay of text and later commentary

in the Torah, and the organization of the Talmud around a verbal debate that seeks to clarify the ambiguous, is reflected in psychoanalytic hermeneutics as well.

Freud came of age at a time when the old faith was being swept aside to make room for the ascendancy of science and rationality. He lived long enough to see his cherished ideals of the "primacy of the intellect" and the supremacy of science pressed into the service of the most destructive initiatives imaginable. Many of his own illusions were shattered; moreover, who knows, were he alive today, what he would make of the worldwide religious resurgence. But without detracting a whit from the grandeur of his discoveries, and with a nod to *Hamlet*, we may say that on the subject of religion there are more things in heaven and earth than were dreamt of in Freud's philosophy.

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