Psychoanalysis was started by a Jew, Sigmund Freud. How do we make sense of that fact? In this paper, I pose a slightly different question, namely how did Freud make sense of that fact? I begin with some comments about another scientist-physician from Hapsburg Austro-Hungary, Ludwig Fleck, because this man’s work on the sociology of scientific knowledge provides the warrant for my approach. Fleck, a Polish Jew and an immunologist, was born in 1896 in Lvov. After completing lyceum, the equivalent of gymnasium, he pursued bacteriology and immunology in medical school, but finding that his ethnic background blocked him from a formal position at the University of Lvov, he began his career as laboratory researcher in Przemysl. In 1936, writing in a field far from immunology, Fleck published the landmark volume, *The Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, which Thomas Kuhn credits with inspiring his own work on scientific paradigms and the shifts in them that constitute scientific revolutions. Fleck maintained that scientific discovery is impacted by social, cultural, historical, personal and psychological facts.

How did Fleck conceive of his own Jewishness in terms of his achievement and vice versa? We don’t exactly know. Did he see his contribution to sociology as reflecting the “thought collective” of his upbringing in Livov? Did he see his own “thought style” as reflecting Jewish traditions and Jewish situations? If he did, we should note that this legacy of his Jewishness had become fully self-conscious. The theory itself retains and reflects the impact of his identity, yet it also exemplifies and lifts it to a new level of universality. We should expect no less complexity when we approach Freud. In what follows, I will attempt to distinguish at
least three distinct strands in Freud’s identity as a Jew: his commitment to the ideal of Bildung, his response to anti-Semitism, and his “godlessness.”

Bildung

Freud was born in Freiburg in Moravia and the family moved to Vienna in his fourth year. His parents were born in Galicia: his father Jakob in Tzimenitz and his mother Amalia in Brody. Though Freud never denied his Galicianer origins though he seems not to have been proud of them, preferring to emphasize more distant roots centuries earlier in the city of Cologne closer to the heart of German culture. Freud's father Jakob had moved to Moravia after a decade spent traveling between Tzimenitz and Freiberg on his business as a wool merchant. Influenced by his grandfather, Siskind Hoffman, Jakob became a Maskil, an enlightened Jew, more in sympathy with the German Jewish Reform movement than with traditional rabbinical Judaism. In 1855, the year that he married Amalie Nathanson, his second or third wife, Jakob began to wear Western dress. By that time, he was already speaking and signing documents in German rather than Hebrew or Yiddish. By the time Sigmund was five, his parents were settled in Vienna and by language, education, and dress, Sigmund was raised to take part in Viennese society.

According to the historian Oscar Handlin, Freud’s contemporaries saw a university degree as the only way of earning respect. For middle class, secular Jews in Austria and Germany, Bildung—with its defined cultural symbols, among which a university degree was necessary—was status. The historian Sara Winter notes, in agreement with Handlin, that schooling was the main vehicle of acculturation for Jews in mid-nineteenth-century Vienna. Winter writes, “By that time a gymnasium education had become a crucial element of upper-class and professional status in Germany and the German-speaking countries. And for those who did not come from
economically and socially privileged backgrounds, the ideal of Bildung had the special benefit that it enabled them to claim their good taste as the basis for membership in a moral elite."

Yet here a tension grew between the generations. For Jakob Freud, Haskalah meant adopting secular dress and the German language, and abandoning the old rituals and perhaps also the old beliefs. This was assimilation enough. For his son Sigmund, continuing in the tradition of Haskalah meant something more. Gerorge Mosse, the German intellectual historian, has argued that for Jews as well as for others, the search for Bildung was also a search for respectability, or Sittlichkeit. The cultural and political historian Carl Schorske came to a similar conclusion: Since Jews were stereotyped as less moral than the upright Germans and more governed by passions—and as medical historian Sander Gilman would point out, by neurosis—it was absolutely necessary as they sought acceptance into mainstream German society that they demonstrate their capacity for self-discipline. As Schorske (1980) has put it, “the virtue of learning was not as important as the learning of virtue.”

Freud’s typically Jewish commitment to Bildung arguably reached its acme when the city of Frankfurt awarded him the Goethe Prize for Literature in 1930. Freud subsequently remembered the occasion of the Goethe Prize together with Thomas Mann’s published encomium a year earlier in tones of a bittersweet nostalgia, writing of “the short-lived illusion that I was among the writers to whom a great nation like Germany was ready to listen”. The passion for all things German, felt by so many Austrian and German Jews, is the focal point for another bitter anecdote about another celebrated but embattled writer, Erich Maria Remarque. When the émigré Remarque was baited by a Nazi to return to Germany with the words, “Aren’t you homesick?” he replied, “No, I am not Jewish.”
All this began at home for the young Freud. His father did determined double duty as Sigmund’s first and only early teacher, schooling him on the Phillipson Bible, which with its matching German and Hebrew texts, its wonderful illustrations and plates, and its commentary, provided a thoroughly Enlightenment approach. Freud later reminisced about his early studies: “My deep engrossment in the Bible story (almost as soon as I had learnt the art of reading) had, as recognized much later, an enduring effect upon the direction of my interest.” In Gymnasium, Samuel Hammerschlag picked up where Jakob left off. Freud’s later obituary of Hammershlag is a virtual paean to Jewish Bildung: “Religious instruction served him as a way of educating towards love of the humanities, and from the material of Jewish history he was able to find means of tapping the sources of enthusiasm hidden in the hearts of young people and of making it flow out far beyond the limitations of nationalism or dogma” (S.E. 9: p. 225).

But even as Freud welcomed the ideal of Bildung as his intellectual home ground, the necessary divergence from traditional Jewish society brought its own strains. In The Ordeal of Civility, John Murray Cuddihy (1974) examines what emancipation meant for Jewish intellectuals. Each adoption of larger European cultural values was also a step away from the Jewish culture of their families. Cuddihy suggests that upwardly mobile urban Jews of the nineteenth century felt embarrassment toward their provincial parents, and "guilt for being thus ashamed" (1974, p. 51). Certainly, this kind of ambivalence is one strand in the coat of Freud’s identity. He subsequently minimized his knowledge of Jewish subjects, including Hebrew and Yiddish, as in his disclaimer to A. A. Roback in a letter of 1930: “My education was so unJewish that today I cannot even read your dedication, which is evidently written in Hebrew. In later life I have often regretted this lack in my education” (E. Freud, Ed., 1960, p. 395). Similarly, in his
analysis of “My Son the Myops” dream in The Interpretation of Dreams, he struggles with the Hebrew word geseres: “According to information I have received from philologists, ‘Geseres’ is a genuine Hebrew word derived from a verb ‘goiser’, and is best translated by ‘imposed suferings’ or ‘doom.’ The use of the term in slang would incline one to suppose that it meant ‘weeping and wailing’” (1900, p. 442). As though he did not quite know what geseres meant on his own. In the original, this passage is even more dismissive for the word “slang” is Strachey’s translation for the far more resonant German word “Jargon.” As the Jewish historian Yosef Yuerulshami comments: “…Jargon to cultivated German-speaking Jews was also the common deprecatory synonym for Yiddish.” As for Yiddish itself, as opposed to Hebrew, Freud professed not to know it at all.

Yet, as has been argued most succinctly by Yerushalmi, Freud’s disclaimers are suspect. Hebrew lay on every facing page of the Phillipson Bible, and the father could read it. A boy so brilliant as Freud would surely have picked some words at least. And as Yerushalmi points out, we have “firm testimony” that “Jakob Freud would impressively recite the entire text of the Passover Haggadah by heart at the annual Seder”? Moreover, whatever the attention paid or not paid to it at home, Hebrew was part of the Gymnasium curriculum. As for Yiddish, Yerushalmi offhandedly counts 13 words in Freud’s published correspondence, including common enough words like Schammes, Schnorrer, and Meschugge, but also words like Knetcher (wrinkles), Stuss (nonsense), and Dalles (poverty). More to the point, there is good warrant to believe that Yiddish was Freud's mother's Amalia’s only spoken language. Freud must have spoken it with her as a child--and even as an adult when he visited her every Sunday until her death in 1930.
Assimilation also involved a change in name as Freud, presumably with his father’s blessing, discarded “Sigismund” in favor of “Sigmund” during his last years at Gynasium (1869 or 1870) as he prepared to enter University. “Sigismund” had then recently gained currency as a favorite name in anti-Semitic jokes. In this specific connection, it may also be noted, as many have, that Freud began to collect Jewish jokes after his father’s death—and that they served as fodder for his theoretical breakthrough to the realms of unconscious sexuality. In Der Witz, the jokes are labeled by him as Jewish, and though they are written in good German, they contain direct or indirect discourse that uses Mauschln to characterize the speaker as a Jew. Gilman comments on the implication of this move for Freud’s self-appraisal: “The exercise of collecting and retelling Jewish jokes, of removing them from the daily world in which Freud must live to the higher plane of the new scientific discourse, that of psychoanalysis, enables Freud to purge himself of the insecurity felt in his role of a Jew in fin de siècle Vienna. He exorcizes his anxiety by placing it in the closed world of the book and placing himself in the privileged position of an author employing the new language of psychoanalysis for an audience newly taught this discourse.” I think this supports Cuddihy’s thesis that what Freud was subsequently saying to the Viennese world, by presenting to them their unconscious, was that they were just as “Schmutzic” as the Jews.

Three incidents, separated by thirty years, mark the milestones of Freud’s journey toward assimilation compared to his father’s. The first is perhaps too familiar. In the Interpretation of Dreams, Freud reported his father once telling him about an incident from his own past, where a Gentile commanded him to get off the pavement and knocked his “fur cap” into the street. Jakob was clearly wearing a Shtreimal, the classic Hasidic fur hat, copied from the dress of 16th century
Polish noblemen and worn on the Sabbath and Holidays. But at the time of the conversation with his son, Freud is “10 or 12” years of age; this puts the conversation in the very midst of the tumultuous period culminating in the reforms of 1867 under the Burgerministerium. These reforms changed the day-to-day life of Jews throughout the empire and won for the new government the undying loyalty of Jews everywhere within it. Freud recalled the exact same period elsewhere in the Interpretation of Dreams: “These were the days of the ‘Burger’ Ministry. Shortly before, my father had brought home portraits of these middle-class professional men—Herbst, Giskra, Unger, Berger and the rest—and we had illuminated the house in their honour. There had even been some Jews among them. So henceforth every industrious Jewish schoolboy carried a Cabinet Minister’s portfolio in his satchel.” (p. 193) Note that the names were still lively in Freud’s memory more than thirty years later. The boy had obviously been involved in the events of the day, as was the father. The whole point of the father’s account is to say how bad things used to be. Note, too, the placement of the incident: a walk on the Sabbath “in the city of your birth.” That would be Freiberg. But the wording veers away from any suggestion that Freud had been born yet; the father does not say “when you were a baby” or “when you were still a small child.” The scene could have happened as early as 1844, the first time Jakob is known to have stayed in Freiberg. We know Jakob was there then, and again subsequently, because as a Jew he had to file for a permit allowing him to stay in the city. If the incident does date back to 1844, or to the years immediately following, then we are in a quite different period. Oppressive restrictions on Jews were still in place—including the restriction that forbade Jews to use the sidewalk! Jakob’s reaction in the incident also speaks to the times because in those days, indeed even down to the time of the walk with his son, it was a matter of law that a Jew could not “give satisfaction,” i.e. a Jew was not allowed to respond to a public insult in the
traditional manner of offering a duel. For Freud, the father’s story was a shameful disappointment and it filled him with feelings of vengeance. He sought refuge from his shame not by accessing his stories of Massada or the defenders of the Temple. Instead, He goes to Hannibal, and to his father Hamilcar, figures who hail from the Classical past, whom Freud would have read about in Latin. The son’s associative world was already quite different from his father’s. As for fighting, when he was twenty seven and in something like the same situation, Freud was ready to fight, but by then things were quite different again.

A second incident more than twenty years later again takes us to shame. It rather represents Jakob’s implicit comment about how far Freud was going in his journey toward assimilation. In 1891, Jakob retrieved the Phillipson Bible he had tutored the young boy on, had it rebound in new leather, and gave it to his son on the occasion of the latter’s thirty-fifth birthday. By this time, Sigmund had been in practice for five years and had been married for four and a half. He had married into the Jewish intellectual and religious aristocracy of the Bernays family, but had lobbied insistently with his fiancée against her religious observances. Indeed, he did not want to stand beneath the Chuppa at the wedding, enough so that he created a small tempest by insisting on a civil marriage in Germany. But the union was not legally recognized in Catholic Vienna, so a second marriage had to be performed. Freud even considered conversion just to escape the ceremony. He capitulated finally under the friendly advice of his mentor and patron, Josef Breuer, who counseled simply that it would all be “too complicated.”

Besides having the Bible rebound in new leather, Jakob added an inscription written in Hebrew. Let us observe with Yerulshami that ordinarily a dedication is written in a language
that is accessible to the recipient—even if a little help is needed along the way. Beyond being in Hebrew, the inscription is written in *melitzah*, a widely used device among Jewish writers, both enlightened *maskilim* and their predecessors. In essence, *melitzah* is a kind of mosaic comprised of quotations and fragments of Biblical and Talmudic quotations. It not only requires erudition, or at least great familiarity, with the Bible and sometimes also with the Talmud, on the part of the writer, but it presumes that the resonances will not be entirely lost on the reader. Consider this carefully: If Freud could not read Hebrew, as he later maintained, and if he could thus not make heads or tails of the passage, then the dedication potentially constitutes a rebuke, albeit a loving one., for not keeping to the traditions. Yosef Yerulshami has pointed out an inner reference to Moses in a delicate exegesis of one of the lines in the melitzah—“Since then the book has been stored like the fragments of the tablets in an ark with me.” The reference points to Talmudic sources holding that after Moses broke the tablets of the Ten Commandments in anger, the fragments were collected and stored, along with the new tablets, in the Ark of the Covenant. Yerulshami thus hears an important late echo of the birthday inscription—“the fragments of the tablet”—in Freud’s account of visiting Michelangelo’s statue of Moses in St. Pietro, which he first did in 1901, ten years later after the birthday gift: “Sometimes I have crept cautiously out of the half-gloom of the interior as though I myself belonged to the mob upon whom his eye is turned—the mob which can hold fast no conviction, which has neither faith nor patience, and which rejoices when it has regained its illusory idols [1914, p. 213].”

A third and final incident comes in 1904, eight years after the father’s death, during a visit to the Acropolis with his brother Alexander, where Freud experienced something like a sense of derealization. Freud’s analysis of the feeling is explicit on the subject of guilt and
assimilation: “It seems as though the essence of success was to have got further than one’s father, and as though to excel one’s father was still something forbidden…The very theme of Athens and the Acropolis in itself contained evidence of the son’s superiority. Our father had been in business, he had had no secondary education, and Athens could not have meant much to him. Thus what interfered with our enjoyment of the journey was a feeling of filial piety.” [257-248]

Freud could read Greek; he could read Sophocles *Oedipus Rex* in the original and all the works of antiquity. The world of Athens, the epicenter of Classical Greek culture, had a resonance for him that it could never have had for his father, whose languages were Yiddish, Hebrew, and German. The son had devoured books and was the product of that endeavor. The father had read only The Book—and also the Talmud

Freud’s predicament was reinforced by his milieu. The Leopoldstadt, the district where Jakob had created the new homestead and where Sigmund grew up, was one of three districts in Vienna in which Jews typically settled. The historian Marsha Rozenblit (p. 14) has described the resulting concentration: “Within these districts, which were adjacent to each other, Jews also concentrated in certain areas, so that some parts of the city were—or at least seemed—almost wholly Jewish. While there were some distinctions based on wealth within this Jewish concentration, in general rich and poor Jews lived together in the same neighborhoods, with the richer Jews in nicer apartment houses on the main thoroughfares, and poorer Jews in shabbier buildings on the smaller side streets.” Thus guilt toward the father may have been difficult to separate from shame about the milieu. We have a single telling anecdote about the latter. When Freud was twenty-seven, the suicide of his University friend Nathan Weiss who had thrown
himself at his fiancée and forced a marriage, led to an ugly scene at the funeral as the presiding lecturer blamed the girl’s family for the death. “And all this he spoke with the powerful voice of the fanatic, with the ardor of the savage, merciless Jew,” Freud wrote to Martha, “We were all petrified with horror and shame in the presence of the Christians who were among us.” The embarrassment only compounded Freud’s sense of chagrin. In fact, Freud had been put off by his friend’s behavior before the suicide, and had consulted his signally distinguished new friend from the Physiology Laboratory, Josef Breuer, about Weiss’s aggressively self-important behavior: “Breuer said rightly that he reminded him of the story of the old Jew who asks his son; ‘My son, what do you want to be?’ And the son answers: ‘Vitriol, the stuff that eats its way through everything.’” Already by this time, Breuer was a distinguished man, a distinguished Jewish man, very much someone to emulate for Freud. Together, they had been talking about a Jew who did not measure up.

The Weiss story, with its Breuer connection, illustrates another truth about the Jewish milieu of Vienna: Concentration in certain parts of the city was matched by concentration in the schools and in certain professions. The percentage of Jews in educational institutions at all levels also grew dramatically. Indeed, during Freud’s years at the Sperl Gymnasium, opened in 1864 to handle the influx into the Leopoldstadt, the rise in the percentage of Jews had been especially sharp, jumping from 44% to 73% of the student body. In medical school the extremely high—38.6 % of all students in 1880. In his education, at any rate, Freud had been following a distinctively Jewish path and in his ultimate choice of professions, Freud was again typical, for neurology, like skin diseases and certain other medical specialities, was replete with Jewish practitioners.
Solomon Ehrmann, whom Freud befriended in medical school in the Fall of 1874, later remembered the general atmosphere among the Jewish students: “We abandoned the altars upon which our fathers served and offered ourselves—in common with our fellow man of a different confession—to what was allegedly new, because we were told that now a new ideal, the ideal of humanity, the fraternization of mankind, was to be worshiped” (cited in Klein, 1981, 48). And with this move toward a new ideal, there came a kind of disconnection vis-à-vis the generation before in which the father’s blessing was both there and not there. Kafka spoke to the problem for the Jewish writers of his generation: “What most of those who begin to write in German wanted was to break with Judaism, generally with the vague approval of their fathers (this vagueness is the revolting part of it). That is what they wanted but their hind legs were bogged down in their Father’s Judaism so their front legs could find no new ground. The resulting despair was their inspiration.” This is Kafka, to be sure, but is it so far from the Freud of the Interpretation of Dreams, who dreams of his “uncle with the yellow beard” precisely in connection with a nomination for an assistant professorship? This is the uncle, Josef, whose conviction for counterfeiting had years ago turned Jakob’s hair grey in a few days. In the analysis, Freud links Josef to two young colleagues, both Jewish, both waiting on their own nominations to the faculty. The question for Freud in 1897, the question Kafka is posing, is how will he finally pull both his legs out the world he comes from? Like Joseph the dream interpreter, Freud will hit on a plan: The analysis of his dreams, his own and others’, like the analysis of jokes, Jewish and otherwise, will create a new authorial and professional self. Here, too, “despair” is “inspiration.”

Thus, when Freud is looking out from the Acropolis in the early Fall of 1904 and feeling
that it not quite real, we hear echoes of social shame lurking beneath his summary diagnosis of “filial piety.” We have a less pious and more telling version of the same theme from the account of a Dr. M. Grinwold. Grinwold was a religious Jew who hailed from Buzhocz, the birthplace of Freud’s paternal grandfather, Schelomo. In 1941 Grinwold contributed an article to Ha’aretz, the oldest Jewish periodical in Palestine, describing an encounter with Freud in Vienna in the early years of the twentieth century. Grinwold had just given a lecture on a controversial popular drama, Yohanan the Prophet, that many thought disparaging of Orthodox Jews. After the talk, while Grinwold and his audience were having a friendly luncheon, Freud made several jokes related to religion, and pointed out how many Jews resembled Yohanan, the protagonist of the play, with his shaggy coat, unkempt hair, and mysterious face. Then Freud commented that himself preferred to be the man in the elegant tuxedo rather than the one dressed like a prophet. Grinwold recalled thinking to himself, “How far this man has drifted from Jewish life.”

And this takes us to the inevitable irony of an assimilated identity: Tuxedo or not, one remains a Jew regardless. Changing one’s name, conversion, contributing to German literature all were to no avail in the eyes of the other. The writer Ludwig Borne captured the predicament of the Jew in polite society: “It is a kind of miracle! I’ve experienced it a thousand times and yet it still seems new to me. Some find fault with me for being a Jew; others forgive me; still others go so far as to compliment me for it; but every last one of them thinks of it.” And this takes us to the topic of antisemitism and how Freud responded to it.

Antisemitism

The term “antisemitism” first appeared as a descriptive term in 1860 and first became a
shockingly normative one, something to be proud of, in 1880 with the Berlin journalist and agitator Wilhelm Marr’s pamphlet, “The Way to Triumph of Germanicism over Judaism.” The following year, 1881, the term became widespread in Vienna. The reality to which the term referred, or alternatively sought to advance, was new: a hatred of Jews based not on their religion—as old as Christianity itself—but on the basis of their race. In the face of this kind of hatred, conversion was no protection. Nor was assimilation. Nor was Bildung.

Antisemitism dogged Freud at each step of the way. In Gymnasium: “In the higher classes I began to understand for the first time what it meant to belong to an alien race, and anti-Semitic feelings among the other boys warned me that I must take up a definite position” (1900, p. 229). In University: “When, in 1873, I first joined the University, I experienced some appreciable disappointments. Above all, I found that I was expected to feel myself inferior and an alien because I was a Jew. I refused absolutely to do the first of these things. I have never been able to see why I should feel ashamed of my descent or, as people were beginning to say, of my ‘race’. I put up, without much regret, with my non-acceptance into the community” (1900, p. 9). At the General Hospital, his friend Erhmann would later recall the rejection and restraints he faced and another friend and colleague, Karl Koller, was abruptly called a Saujud, a “Jewish swine,” in the midst of a technical dispute with a fellow surgeon. As luck would have it, both Koller and the other surgeon were reserve officers, a happenstance which made it possible for a duel and Koller won. “A proud day for us,” Freud wrote to Martha. Freud’s own proud day, when he stood up to the anti-Semites on the train to Liepzig—“there came a shout from the background: ‘He’s a dirty Jew’”—had taken place two years earlier in 1883. “I do think I held
my own quite well, and used the means at my disposal courageously; in any case I didn’t fall to their level,” he wrote to Martha.

It is almost axiomatic in historical scholarship to trace the rise of antisemitism from 1880 onward to the influx of European Jews to Vienna and Germany, but as my colleague, Joseph Greenberg, has suggested, antisemitism may also have reflected anxiety about competition from the class of assimilated, educated Jews who were rising. In any event, when his relationship with his Jewish mentor, Josef Breuer, began to grow increasingly strained in 1896, Freud was increasingly on his own in an increasingly anti-Semitic city. On September 19, 1897, eleven months after the death of his father Jakob, nine months after Nothnagel had first proposed him for a Professorship, and five months after Karl Lueger had finally been confirmed Mayor of Vienna, Freud joined the B’nai B’rith. Freud had turned down an initial invitation two years earlier. Now his circumstances were different. Freud recalled these circumstances and his own feeling in a letter to the Lodge nearly thirty years later. Sander Gilman has called it Freud’s “confession Judaica”:

I felt as though outlawed, shunned by all. This isolation aroused in me the longing for a circle of excellent men with high ideals who would accept me in friendship despite my temerity….That you are Jews could be welcome to me, for I was myself a Jew, and it has always appeared not only undignified, but outright foolish to deny it. What tied me to Jewry was—I have to admit it—not the faith, not even the national pride, for I was always an unbeliever, have been brought up without religion, but not without respect for the so-called “ethical” demands of human civilization…. But there remained enough to make the attraction of Judaism and the Jews irresistible, many dark emotional
powers all the stronger the less they could be expressed in words, as well as the clear
consciousness of an inner identity, the familiarity of the same psychological
structure…Because I was a Jew I found myself free of many prejudices that restrict
others in the use of the intellect; as a Jew I was prepared to be in the opposition and to
renounce agreement with the ‘compact majority.’

Well spoken in 1926, but it would have also been equally well spoken in 1897. For what
Freud was exactly at work on at the time he joined the Lodge was the beginnings of the new
sexual theory. And that theory would revolutionize the scientific understanding of outpatient
disorders, by substituting the “bedrock” of sexuality for the old “bedrock” of hereditary
degeneration. Sander Gilman has charted the theoretical breakthrough, and its implications for
all previously existing racial theories of neurosis, while Dennis Klein has charted the career of
Brother Freud, and its implications for the soon-to-be-launched psychoanalytic movement, but
the two developments deserve to be viewed together. Historically, and thematically, they are of
a piece. The new theory was indeed the crucial breakthrough in terms of getting race out of the
psychiatric paradigm. And for a full four years, from 1898 to 1902, all of Freud’s lectures on the
new science aborning were delivered to the members of the B’nai B’rith. Moreover, his fellow
Lodge members were his only auditors until he convened the Wednesday Night discussion
Group, that is, outside of his friend Wilehlm Fliess. And to Fliess, as Peter Gay notes, Freud
complained at the time that he felt like “an old, somewhat shabby Israelite.”

In this context the fact that the first nineteen members of the Wednesday Night discussion
group were Jews potentially takes on a new meaning, for they were the heirs to and replacements
for the Brothers at the lodge. And indeed, members of the group were conscious of their identity
as Jews. Fritz Wittels and Otto Rank wrote about it proudly. Then, too, the new organizational skills Freud displayed in leading the group reflected skills he had first developed in his activities at the Lodge. Where tensions and a different kind of self-consciousness arose was when psychoanalysis began attracting non-Jewish members and adherents. As if to announce the beginning of a difficult new era, on the first night that Carl Jung attended a meeting of the Vienna Group in 1907—he and Ludwig Binswanger were the first recorded Gentile guests—Alfred Adler, who had gone the route of conversion, presented the case of a patient who had also converted but remained conflicted about his Jewish identity. Beyond this starting point, the record is too rich to review. There are the repeated invocations, cited by Gay, of a shared “racial kinship” in Freud’s letters to Karl Abraham together with warnings about alienating the Gentiles and especially Jung—“Only his appearance has saved psychoanalysis from becoming a Jewish national affair”—and the wonderful summary plaint, “Be assured, if my name were Oberhuber, my innovations would have found, despite it all, far less resistance.” There is Freud’s scolding of his fellow Viennese on the eve of founding the International Association: “Most of you are Jews, and therefore incompetent to win friends for the new teaching. Jews must be content with the modest role of preparing the ground… The Swiss will save us—will save me, and all of you as well.” And, at the end of it all, as the alliance with the Swiss was finally falling irrevocably apart, there is the advice to Ferenczi on polemics, with its redemptive call to science as a congenially Jewish enterprise: “there should not be a particular Ayran or Jewish science. The results must be identical, and only their presentation may vary…. If these differences occur in conceptualizing objective relations in science, then something is wrong. It was not our desire to interfere with their more distant worldview and religion, but we considered ours to be quite favorable for conducting science” (pp. 490-491).
Freud here hits what I believe was exactly the base note for him: The “Jewish spirit” is “quite favorable” for conducting science, yet the results must be universal—or it is not science. When Brother Freud lectured at the B’nai B’rith he was lecturing about science. The bitterness of the break appears differently in different letters: Freud wrote of “Jews and Goyim” separating like “oil and water” in another letter to Ferenczi (p. 231) while to Rank he wrote of having tried to unite “Jews and anti-Semites on the soil of Psy-A (cited in Gay, p. 231). Yet, regardless of whether the Swiss were merely Goyim or truly “anti-Semites,” science was the defense.

It was in this exact context that Freud wrote his essay on the Moses of Michelangelo. In the early Fall of 1913, both immediately before and immediately after the final showdown with the Swiss at the Fourth Congress of the International Psychoanalytic Association, Freud revisited the statue daily. Freud’s analysis of the statue speaks to an obvious identification with Moses and to his own restraint in the heat of the moment: “a concrete expression of the highest mental achievement that is possible in a man, that of struggling against an inward passion for the sake of a cause to which he has devoted himself.” In 1901, as Yerushalmi has suggested, Moses could as well have been Freud’s father Jakob, chiding him for abandoning Jewish ways, for not keeping the “broken tablets” safe. In 1914, Moses was Freud himself, in his father’s place, furious yet restraining himself, and preserving the “laws” of psychoanalysis. As with the crowd on the train to Liepzig, Freud was not going to be let himself drawn to the level of the rabble. Nor did this side of Freud ever wane. The recurring encounter with anti-Semitism kept him determinedly defiant despite his seeming assimilation. As he phrased it to an interviewer in 1926, the same year as his “confession judaica” to the B’nai B’rith: “My language is German. My culture, my attainments, are German. I considered myself German intellectually, until I
noticed the growth of anti-Semitic prejudice in Germany and German Austria. Since that time, I prefer to call myself a Jew” (cited in Gay, p. 139).

**Godlessness**

There is yet one more crucial strand to consider in Freud’s identity as a Jew—his utter, militant Godlessness—and it, too, intertwines with psychoanalysis. To be an unbelieving Jew, a *Gottloser Jude*, was nothing exceptional. Indeed, it was commonplace and had been since the *Haskalah* first spread among the Jews of Europe. Freud could have been offhanded about his disbelief and sometimes was —“God has not done much for me.” He could have worn his disbelief lightly, and treated religion with simple indifference as fellow analysts like Abraham, Ferenczi, and Isidor Sadger did. Instead, he went out of his way to make religion and belief a target of the new science.

The first shot came in 1908, with the summary judgment in “Obsessive Actions and Religious Rituals” that religion is “a universal obsessional neurosis,” with the chief difference that the instincts suppressed beneath religious practices are “the egoistic and antisocial ones.” The paper attacks ritual, which Freud was so opposed to in his personal life, as well as belief.

This paper was as nothing compared to the salvo of *Totem and Taboo*, written and published in four installments during the climax of the struggle with the Swiss. Here the target is more clearly Christian conscience and communion. At the time, Freud trumpeted to Abraham that it would “serve to cut us off cleanly from all Aryan religiousness.” In 1930, in a preface for a new translation into Hebrew, Freud added a universalist disclaimer: “it adopts no Jewish standpoint and makes no exceptions in favour of Jewry. The author hopes, however, that he will
be at one with his readers in the conviction that unprejudiced science cannot remain a stranger to
the spirit of the new Jewry.” By this time, Freud had already had gone into print with the *Future of an Illusion*. Hereafter psychoanalysis itself was on the hook for Freud’s irreligion. For the whole crux of the demolition is based on the premise that with the advent of the new
metapsychological discipline, science is now equipped with tools to reveal religion as illusion once and for all by revealing its wishful sources. That left only the littlest bit of wiggle room for the next generation of analysts; as Freud wrote to Eitingon at the time: “It remains to be seen whether analysis *in itself* must really lead to the giving up of religion” (cited in Gay, 1987, p. 12).

The historian Josef Yerushalmi has already decided that the issue is a psychological one:
“Beyond any detail, the very violence of Freud’s recoil against Jewish religious belief and ritual
must arouse our deepest suspicion. It displays an aggressive intensity that normally accompanies
a rebellion against an equally intense former attachment, more typical of a former Yeshiva
student in revolt against Judaism that of one who had received a minimal Jewish education and
whose father, we are assured, had become a freethinker by the time he settled in Vienna.” The
psychoanalyst and Jesuit William Meissner has decided that the issue is a deep psychological
one: “Freud’s religious views perhaps more than any other aspect of his work and his psychology
reflect underlying and unresolved ambivalences and conflicts stemming from the earliest psychic
strata.” However, the only real historical evidence we have concerning Freud’s early beliefs
comes when Freud was 18 in his letters to Eduard Silberstein recounting his encounters with the
theistic philosopher Franz Brentano. A careful reading of these letters show something very
striking. This youth does not *need* a belief in God. Nor, which is more important does he yet
need a disbelief in God. If Freud’s passion is later for disbelief, if his attitude is one of revolt against religion, it must have sources in his life after the age of 18, after 1874. And whatever those sources, they must grow psychologically stronger as he gets older.

I think that the root source of the intensity of his contempt for religion is not be found in his childhood and not in his personal-psychological history, but after adolescence in his social-psychological history. That is, I think buried within Freud’s attitude is his selective sense of shame, humiliation, and sheer frustration with his co-religionists insofar as they maintain the old religion, the old rituals, the old ways. That is their madness, that is what keeps them still tied to their Shtetl backgrounds and keeps them as the obvious targets of antisemitic prejudice. In this vein, let us look again at the psychological structure that Freud finds at the heart of conscience: inherited guilt over an inherited murder. Personally, I do not doubt that when Freud examined his own self inwardly that this is what he found. Or perhaps better, we can say that the formula expresses what he found, which in itself is beyond words. But what makes a man decide that parricide is in him, that he is not only capable of the deed but that in some sense he knows he has committed it? In Totem and Taboo, Freud argued that this sense is universal. In Moses and Monotheism, he went further and argued that beyond being universal, it was archetypally Jewish, the Jews having committed a second murder, of Moses, thus repeating the first murder and further fixing the motif phylogenetically in their very blood and bones. Might we not see the motif of repeated parricide as the expression of a two-generation social motif in the Freud family where in each generation the son abandons the religion of the father, and stakes his own claim to life, with an unfathomable combination of determination, shame, regret and perhaps sheer fury at having to do this to survive?
Conclusion

In Moses and Monotheism, we see the three different strands in Freud’s Jewish identity intertwining anew and, I think, his final view of his own science. His acceptance of being a Jew is embedded in the whole notion that the Jews have a special shared phylogenetic heritage. It is a racial view. His own identity as a cosmopolitan assimilated Jew is spoken for in the claim that the Jews have inherited a special intellectuality. Freud’s own godlessness is here, too, of course. The belief in the father god is an inherited truth only in the sense that it recalls the primeval event of parricide, which it otherwise misinterprets. Science, the refuge from antisemitism in Freud’s life, is obviously spoken for in the very endeavor, for it is the application of the new branch of science, psychoanalysis, which enables Freud to justify his “historical novel,” and see it as superior to traditional biblical commentary, rabbinical or otherwise. As for antisemitism, it is the very provocation for writing the book. As Freud put it to Arnold Zweig: “Faced with new persecutions, one asks oneself again how the Jews have come to be what they are and why they have attracted this undying hatred.” Freud’s answer culminates in a psychoanalytic explanation of Christian hatred of the Jews. Even such small details as Freud’s own antipathy to ritual is there, for what is important in his account of the essence of Judaism are not the rituals, but the monotheism, important as an advance over older superstitions, and the intellectuality. Perhaps most important, Freud’s examination of his own conscience against the backdrop of his relation to Jakob and to the world Viennese Jews is there. One finds it gleaming through between the lines of the text in the fundamental irony that parricide is the aboriginal source of the psychic institution of conscience. It is all there.
This is exactly what we would expect to find if we follow, as I have tried to do, the lead of Ludwig Fleck. Fleck maintained that scientific discovery is impacted by social, cultural, historical, personal and psychological facts. In Freud’s final major psychoanalytic statement, we find all the elements, social, cultural, historical and personal, of his own particularity as a Jew. But, in examining Fleck’s theory at the outset, I pointed out that in fact the social, cultural, and personal facts of his own life had arguably become fully conscious in his creative achievement of founding the sociology of scientific knowledge. Should we expect less of Freud? In fact, in Moses and Monotheism, I contend that we have Freud’s final testament to the Jewishness of his own creation, not simply another “confession Judaica” but also a “confession analytica.” For if what distinguishes the Jew racially are his inherited intellectuality and the equally inherited fact that he is closer psychologically to the forgotten truth of the primal murder, then it should not surprise us, and it did not surprise Freud, that the man who would finally uncover the truth of the primal murder should have been himself a Jew. In Freud, and in psychoanalysis, the Jewish tradition is at last becoming fully self conscious, and through it so is mankind.

Where does this leave psychoanalysis, finally, and where does it leave us? In the end, one can see Freud’s view of psychoanalysis as a kind of Jewish liberation philosophy carried forward one last step: In psychoanalysis, the Jewish tradition is at last becoming fully self conscious, and through it so is mankind. Religion is based on fear. Psychoanalysis helps mankind overcome fear. The rest is commentary.