

An Analysis of Freud's Jewish Identity

The Jewish World of Sigmund Freud: Essays on Cultural Roots and the Problem of Religious Identity, edited by Arnold D. Richards. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2010, 196 pp.

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Psychoanalysis and religion are strange bedfellows. A strong belief in one may rattle our foundation in the other. An evening with my analyst friends reminded me of this uneasy coupling. That Friday night, *challah* and wine graced our friendship. Bonded together by our shared history in psychoanalysis, we offered news, professional development and then, perhaps incited by institute gossip, we debated about Israel. Now, our comfort with each other threatened, one of us suggested we think instead about our Jewish identity. Oddly, though all of us are Jewish, the very personal nature of this question, the depth and enormity of it, silenced us as we each retreated to ponder: What is our Jewish identity?

Freud, absorbed as he was with psychoanalytic discovery, grappled with the question of his Jewish identity throughout his life, as is made clear in the collection of essays *The Jewish World of Sigmund Freud: Essays on Cultural Roots and the Problem of Religious Identity*. Through an examination of his theories, autobiographical information, dreams, letters, and tidbits, the authors of these essays reveal the complexity of this issue for Freud. Like his theories, Freud's views on his Judaism at times contradict each other, at others elude us. The quotes cited in this book illustrate that towards his Judaism, Freud is fiercely devoted, on the one hand, and dismissive, on the other. Freud, in his inimitable way, has left us to do with his Judaism what he has left us to do with his theories: to delve, examine, question, argue, and posture, which, in Talmudic fashion, the authors of these essays do. To those interested in his Jewish identity,

Freud left the body of information that made up his life for us to discover what his Jewish identity was.

As Salberg tells us in her essay, Freud's dreams and theories uncover aspects of Freud's Judaism that remain largely hidden. As Freud grew up, his parents began to assimilate to the Viennese culture, while maintaining Jewish heritage. Though Freud discarded all practice, "nothing," Salberg wisely reminds us, "is lost in the unconscious." Centering her essay on the famous "unheroic conduct" memory in which Freud's father revealed how he didn't fight back against an anti-Semitic assault, Salberg examines the multiple meanings that this memory had in its historical, religious and cultural context and how these various meanings, some conscious and some not, inform Freud's work, particularly his theory of the Oedipus Complex and the Unconscious. Salberg examines Freud's conceptualizations as both Greek and Jewish, referring to Bergmann's recognition that whereas Freud drew his Oedipus hero from Greek past, he took the guilt part from his Jewish past.

A contextual description of the Viennese Jewish world in which Freud lived is provided by Rozenblit, who sheds light on the ways in which Freud was a typical Viennese Jew. For instance, despite his lack of religious observance, and, despite his position in the secular world, he continued to belong to a Jewish community. Though they no longer adhered to dogma, dressed in religious garb, or worked in traditional Jewish occupations, the Viennese Jews stayed together. They were mostly professionals and business people, tended to live near each other and formed active social and cultural organizations. Though Freud attended the *Gymnasium* (the secular high school in which he partook of a classical Greek education), the classmates with whom he kept company were, for the most part, other Jewish boys. In this way, Rozenblit points out, acculturation was, for Freud, a Jewish group experience. Furthermore, perhaps driven by

shameful feelings about his father's passivity, Freud sought out Jewish mentors, as Armstrong discusses. In the *Gymnasium*, Freud and his peers were taught Jewish history and religion by Josef Breuer's father, Leopold Breuer, as well as by Samuel Hammerschlag, the librarian of the Jewish Community Library in Vienna. The *Gymnasium* was not where Jewish students mainstreamed but was instead a site of Jewish self-differentiation.

We also learn that Freud's complicated Jewish identity informed his professional development, though not always in obvious ways. Freud's early patients were almost exclusively Jewish women, yet there is little mention of this in Freud's writings. Working with these women, Freud recognized the limitations of electrotherapy, the treatment of choice for mental illnesses such as hysteria, and argued that electrotherapy was successful only because of its suggestive effects rather than because of its actual effect on the nervous system. The missing variable in Freud's rejection of electrotherapy, as Gilman notes, was the prevailing question in 19th-century medicine: race. Indeed, Freud found, upon his return to Vienna from Paris, that statements about the Jewish predisposition for forms of mental illness were commonplace. In fact, some sought to make a distinction in mental stability between secular and nonsecular Jews. These debates led Freud to abandon the idea of hysteria as an inherited disease with a racial component. He abandoned electrotherapy and set off to discover the talking cure. Many of his seminal papers appeared in the *Neue Freie Presse* (*The New York Times* of Vienna), the most commonly read daily paper of the Jewish middle class, as Lensing writes.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the role played by Judaism and anti-Semitism in the lives of Freud's patients is examined by Blum. Freud made little reference to his patients' Jewishness in his case studies. Anna O's Jewish identity, for example, along with many aspects of her creative expressiveness, was suppressed. The talking cure lifted this suppression and

Bertha Pappenheim dedicated her life to Jewish and feminist causes. Dora's first dream revealed hidden issues about Jewish identity. "The house on fire," symbolic of the burning of Jewish factories in Bohemia, where Dora's father's factories were located, prefigured the later burnings of Jewish books, synagogues, and eventually Jews themselves. Dora's need to hide her anxiety about these burnings within her dreams would, a few years later, be evident in her efforts to completely run away from Judaism, baptizing herself along with her son and husband. Little Hans' parents, like many Viennese Jewish parents, had concerns about their children's Jewish identity. Little Hans' father, Max Graf, asked Freud whether he should convert his son to Christianity to spare him anti-Semitic hatred. Freud discouraged him, saying he'd "deny him sources of energy which cannot be replaced by anything else." Aside from addressing the specific impact of circumcision on the castration anxiety of Jewish boys in a footnote, Freud makes no mention of the tension at home regarding their Judaism. Blum illustrates how Freud, in his correspondence, suggested that he deliberately kept out references to his—and his patients'—Judaism when presenting his findings so that they would be accepted by the scientific community.

Time passed, and the questions of Freud's Jewish identity persisted within him. His writings on Moses reveal the very personal nature of this struggle. The remainder of the essays address Freud's struggle with the Moses figure expressed in his essay, "The Moses of Michelangelo," and in his later years, *Moses and Monotheism*. Freud traveled frequently to Rome to see Michelangelo's *Moses*. Sculpture, with its lifelike characteristics, as Bergstein points out, provided an arena in which Freud's exploration of his Jewish identity could come to life. Indeed, Freud saw in Michelangelo's *Moses* a human Moses who, like himself, was given to bouts of temper but who also controlled himself. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud described the

Jewish religion, as he described all religions in *Totem and Taboo*, as a biological inheritance of a memory that is transmitted to future generations, either consciously and deliberately or unconsciously. For better or worse, as Slavet notes, the Jewish tradition, according to Freud, will survive despite any attempts by Jews or others to repress or repudiate it. Coming full circle to the question of race, Freud declared that what makes a person Jewish is not whether or not he calls himself a Jew, not whether he practices Judaism or participates in Jewish cultural activities, but simply that he inherited an archaic memory: “the memory-traces of the experiences of our ancestry.” *Moses and Monotheism* reveals Freud’s continuous commitment to a secular understanding of Judaism and stands in contrast to the ideas of religious philosophical thinkers of his time, particularly Levinas, as discussed by Kleinberg. Freud claimed that Moses was an Egyptian and that the origins of the Jewish people result not from divine revelation but directly from Moses. Moreover, Freud argues, from an Oedipal perspective, that there were actually two Moses, the strict father figure who was killed by the Jews, and the good Moses who led them out of Egypt. The killing of the strict Moses is a repetition of the killing of the primal father as described in *Totem and Taboo*. The strict traits of Moses were incorporated into an early conception of God. It is this archaic memory, along with the guilt that ensues, that Jews inherit. Freud’s theories on memory and the complex way that memory informs our lives are essential to Freud’s entire body of work. As Gillman states, the inheritance of an archaic memory of religion has an equally complicated path in our unconscious as well as our conscious lives.

As this volume illustrates, the question of Freud’s Jewish identity was informed by the times in which he lived and, in particular, by the political atmosphere in which he lived in his later years. These questions would have been considered differently, as Mecklenburg states, had they been considered a few years later and been informed by a more horrific history. Even at the

point before he died, however, Freud, now exiled to England, wrestled with the question of his Jewish identity during the last years of his life, calling it an obsession. *Moses and Monotheism* was published three months before he died, in June 1939.

Freud, our towering genius, struggled on a deeply personal level with his Jewish identity throughout his life, as this collection of essays illustrates. He dug deep into the chasms of his inner life in order to discover psychoanalysis, and, yet, his religious identity eluded him. Seeming to live firmly and comfortably in his position as a secular and assimilated Jew, Freud continued to be haunted by the unresolved question of his religious identity. In his later years, history and its accompanying violence presented Freud with many disturbing mysteries about the complex nature of humankind, which he struggled to conquer. During the last years of his life, however, as he witnessed the early horrors of the Holocaust, Freud's final analysis was that of his own religious identity.

I thought of my father as I considered Freud's Jewish identity. As an older man, my father ran to *shul* to pray three times a day. As a younger man, his religious observance was disrupted by the Holocaust, his profound losses, and then, his obligation to steadfastly support his wife and three children. At his funeral, his rabbi likened my father's hunger for *shul*, along with that of his old cronies who sat alongside him, to that of a young boy's hunger for vanilla ice cream. Historically, rising anti-Semitism and the Holocaust both disrupted my father's religious identity and propelled Freud's attempts at understanding his own. As two old men, racing to the finish, they struggled to know what it means to be a Jew.

References

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