The Influence of Sigmund Freud’s Jewishness on His Creation of Psychoanalysis
James William Anderson—Northwestern University and Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis

CLIO’S PSYCHE Vol. 18, No. 2 (September, 2012): 188-196

Sigmund Freud savored Jewish humor so much that he collected, wrote about, and frequently told Jewish jokes. I’ll give an example of one of the Jewish jokes Freud liked and later explain why I quoted this one. The teacher asked a Jewish boy, “Who was Moses’ mother?” The boy, Itzig, answered, “An Egyptian princess.” “No, that’s wrong,” said the teacher. “He was the son of a Jewish mother. The Egyptian princess found him in a basket at the edge of the river.” “Says she!” replied Itzig” (paraphrased from Theodor Reik, The Search Within: The Inner Experience of a Psychoanalyst, 1956, 38).

My topic is the influence of Jewishness on Freud’s creation of psychoanalysis. There were other influences, of course, such as classical thought, German culture—Freud was especially taken by Goethe, Shakespeare—another favorite of his, and especially positivist science of the late 19th Century. But in this short essay I focus on Jewishness, a factor that Freud himself highlighted. He asked a Protestant pastor once, “Why did none of the devout create psychoanalysis? Why did one have to wait for a completely godless Jew” (Peter Gay, Freud: A Life for Our Time, 1988, 602)? Another time he said it wasn’t “a matter of chance” “that the first advocate of psychoanalysis was a Jew” (Standard Edition 1925, 19: 222). Freud realized that his being Jewish was intrinsic to his inventing psychoanalysis.

Freud felt he was “in his essential nature a Jew” (S.E. 1913, 13: xv). Several times he spoke about what it meant to him that he was Jewish. He made it clear that he was an “unbeliever” (S.E. 20: 273), a person who was “completely estranged from the religion of his fathers—as well as from every other religion” (S.E. 1913, 13: xv). While he was a child, his family had no doubt of being Jewish but practiced almost none of the observances of Judaism and did not keep kosher. Freud would not have undergone the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. He learned the stories of the Old Testament and remained fond of them. In the public schools he attended, religious study was required, with Jews and Catholics having separate instructors. Freud had a great fondness for his teacher, Samuel Hammerschlag. What he liked, though, was Hammerschlag’s emphasis on humanistic values. Whatever Hebrew he may have learned he forgot in later years. In adolescence and thereafter he was a confirmed atheist. After his marriage he adamantly opposed any religious observance in his family; his wife was surprised that he forbade her even to light the Sabbath candles. Hence he had a minimum of what can be described as Jewish learning (Dennis B. Klein, Jewish Origins of the Psychoanalytic Movement, 1981).

But he was immersed in Jewish culture and always surrounded by Jews. His friends at every stage of his life, as well as the followers with whom he was close, were Jewish, with only two exceptions that I can think of: Carl Jung, with whom he had a nasty split, and Ernest Jones, the leader of psychoanalysis in Great Britain.

Not surprisingly, he felt at home among Jews. He found the “attraction of Jewry and Jews irresistible,” he noted, because of “many obscure emotional forces” “as well as a clear consciousness of inner identity, the safe privacy of a common mental construction” (S.E. 1926, 20: 274).
He used a similar phrase in a letter in which he wrote to Karl Abraham, a Jewish follower, about Jung before the breakup with Jung. “Please be tolerant and do not forget that it is really easier for you than it is for Jung to follow my ideas.” One of the reasons Freud gave was that “you are closer to my intellectual constitution because of racial kinship, while he as a Christian and a pastor’s son finds his way to me only against great inner resistances” (Hilda Abraham and Ernst Freud, eds., A Psycho-analytic Dialogue: The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Karl Abraham, 1965, 34).

Abraham picked up on Freud’s term and replied, “I freely admit that I find it easier to go along with you than with Jung. I, too, have always felt this intellectual kinship. After all, our Talmudic way of thinking cannot disappear just like that. The other day a small paragraph in Jokes (Freud’s book, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious] strangely attracted me. When I looked at it more closely, I found that, in the technique of apposition and in its whole structure, it was completely Talmudic” (Abraham and Freud, 36).

Abraham no doubt noticed that the method of analysis used in the Talmud and by those who studied the Talmud had signal similarities to Freud’s method. Various works (David Bakan, Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition, 1958; Mortimer Ostow, ed., Judaism and Psychoanalysis, 1982; Lewis Aron and Libby Henik, eds., Answering a Question with a Question: Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Jewish Thought, 2010) have looked at resemblances between psychoanalysis and the Talmud. A page of the Talmud contains a passage of the Torah along with discussion of the passage and also discussions of the discussion. In Central Europe during Freud’s lifetime, believing Jewish boys and men would study, discuss, and debate the Talmud. Freud’s father, but never Freud, was one who read the Talmud. The commentaries were ingenious, free-wheeling, and sometimes playful but also relied on careful attention to the specific words of the Torah. One assumption of the Talmud is that the Torah has hidden meanings that can be discovered. Freud’s analysis of dreams, as well as of some jokes—the point Abraham made—is like Talmudic analysis. Freud would look carefully at words and their connotations; he believed that a verbal creation, such as a dream or a joke, might have a concealed meaning that he could find; and he had a free-wheeling, ingenious style of interpretation that included but went beyond strictly rational analysis.

Freud, though, meant something far more extensive than just the Talmudic way of thinking. He believed that he shared with other Jews the rich body of assumptions, beliefs about human nature, and values that made up Jewish culture in Central Europe at the time. It is this Jewish “mental construction” that, I am arguing, undergirded Freud’s creation of psychoanalysis. Let’s return to the joke about Moses and consider some of the characteristics of that joke that are in keeping with basic elements of psychoanalysis.

First, the joke says that circumstances are not always what they seem to be. The Egyptian princess claims that she found the baby at the edge of the river. As the joke recognized, there may have been something going on within her that caused her to invent that story. Psychoanalysis rests on the assumption that, surface appearances aside, the complicated inner worlds of individuals determine their behavior.

Second, that which is being hidden, according to the joke, has to do with illicit sexuality. The Jewish boy, Itzig, is suggesting that the princess had sex while unmarried and bore a child out of wedlock. While the established view in the field of psychology at the time was that sexuality was of little importance in a person’s mental makeup, Jewish culture, as reflected in its
humor, recognized the powerful and central force of sexuality, and so did Freud’s creation, psychoanalysis.

Third, there is the little boy’s irreverence. Jews were allowed a wide berth in questioning just about anything, even the religion. Moses was arguably the most sacred person in all of Jewish history, yet Itzig calls him a bastard. I submit that, in virtually all Christian confessions, there would be far less tolerance for making a joke like this about Jesus. To create psychoanalysis, Freud had to be willing to come to the conclusion that the contemporary view was dead wrong.

Freud’s being Jewish readied him to question the settled assumptions. “Because I was a Jew,” he once observed, “I found myself free from many prejudices which restricted others in the use of their intellect; and as a Jew I was prepared to join the Opposition and to do without agreement with the ‘compact majority’” (S.E 20: 1926, 274).

The majority at the time simply failed to recognize that psychiatric symptoms could have a psychological cause. Symptoms such as phobias, compulsions, and what we now call conversion reactions were seen as meaningless, as possibly the result of weak nerves or inheritance. Freud created the first systematic psychological theory of psychopathology, and it lies at the heart of his conception of psychoanalysis. I’ll describe the theory succinctly here with a case example.

Freud (S.E. 1917, 16: 248-254) discusses in one of his “Introductory Lectures” a woman in her fifties who had an obsessive and pathological jealousy of her husband. She believed against the strongest evidence that he was having an affair with a younger woman. She believed against the strongest evidence that he was having an affair with a younger woman. I will not consider whether Freud’s analysis of this symptom is correct; I will limit myself to presenting what he said as an example of his theory. He argues that the woman was sexually attracted to her son-in-law. But, to be aware of that attraction would have seemed “monstrous” to her, and therefore she created her neurotic symptom as a way of hiding her illicit attraction from herself. This whole process took place unconsciously. She said, in a sense, “It is not I who wants to sleep with a younger person of the opposite sex, it is my husband who wants that and does it.”

To Freud’s way of thinking, not only did her symptom serve to keep her illicit desire unconscious, it also gave her some outlet for her desire: she could fantasize about sex between a younger and an older person. In Freud’s theory, there is a conflict between a threatening wish, usually an illicit sexual desire, and a person’s superego; the result is the symptom, in this case, the woman’s irrational jealousy.

Sexuality plays a pivotal role in Freud’s theory. He was influenced by the Jewish view of sexuality, a view that differs sharply from the Christian attitude.

In Judaism there is a general appreciation of sexuality and sexual pleasure within marriage. The “Song of Songs” in the Old Testament celebrates sex, as is apparent from the first line: “Beloved, let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth; for your love is better than wine.” Against all common sense, the traditional Christian interpretation is that it is an allegory about Christ’s relationship with His church.

A central law of Judaism is “to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” Love making between husband and wife is a recommended way of following that law. In contrast, Christianity, if I may be allowed a generalization that has some exceptions, takes a begrudging attitude toward sex. A long-standing principle of Christianity is that celibacy is preferable. Hence Paul’s famous comment in the New Testament, “if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with lust.” A similar position was stated as
dogma of the Roman Catholic Church in the Sixteenth Century. “If any one saith, that the marriage state is to be placed above the state of virginity, or of celibacy, and that it is not better and more blessed to remain in virginity, or in celibacy, than to be united in matrimony; let him be anathema” (Council of Trent, Session 24, Canon 10, retrieved from http://www.edwardtbabinski.us/sheldon/clerical_celibacy.html ). The general attitude toward sexuality in Christianity is that it is unclean and preferably avoided, except for purposes of procreation.

My argument is that Freud was readyed to see the importance of sexuality because he was influenced by the greater Jewish acceptance of sexuality.

When he was engaged to his future wife, he met an older Jew who had known her grandfather, a celebrated rabbi. According to the older Jew, the rabbi had been no ascetic. The man had learned from the rabbi, Freud wrote his fiancée, that the Jewish person “is the finest flower of mankind, and is made for enjoyment…. The Jew is made for joy and joy for the Jew.” “Something of the core, of the essence of this meaningful and life-affirming Judaism,” Freud asserted, “will not be absent from our home” (Ernst Freud, ed., Letters of Sigmund Freud, 1960, 21-22). In speaking here of joy, Freud was especially referring, I would argue, to sexual pleasure.

Please note, though, that I specifically referred to a Jewish acceptance of sex “within marriage.” Freud was aware of this aspect of the Jewish view. He noted once that “the Old Jewish religion” restricted “perverted sexuality” and guided “all libidinal currents into the [marital] bed” (Herman Nunberg and Ernst Federn, eds., Minutes of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society 1974, 3: 273). In Freud’s day “perverted sexuality” referred to all sex besides intercourse between husband and wife, including extramarital sex.

Jewish law takes a strong stand toward sex outside marriage; one of the Ten Commandments forbids adultery. This approach, of celebrating sex, but only within marriage, is in keeping with Freud’s explanation of psychopathology. In Freud’s theory, the desire for sex outside of marriage, when a person is in conflict about the desire, causes neurotic symptoms.

There is one other Jewish-Christian difference that I think is especially important to the origins of psychoanalysis. In Judaism the emphasis is on following the rules, being observant. There is no particular sanction against sinful thoughts. A Jew might want to steal or even kill; it is accepted that people will have such thoughts at times. But a person who behaves properly is seen as an observant Jew. In Christianity there has often been a great emphasis on having pure thoughts. In the New Testament Jesus is quoted as saying, “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Taking the desire for adultery and the commitment of adultery, and seeing them as virtually the same, would appear absurd in the Jewish tradition.

The result of this difference is that Jews are relatively free to look inside themselves and to examine their thoughts. Freud found it threatening to discover his own Oedipus complex: to realize that he desired to sleep with his mother and kill his rival, his father. But he was able to search into his inner world and admit to himself that he had these wishes. Christians, especially Calvinists, have found it to be aversive to look within themselves. Being aware of their sinful thoughts tends to be frightening for believing Christians; it can mean that a person is destined for hell.

I am going to end with one other Jewish joke that Freud examined (paraphrased from S.E. 1905, 8: 49-50). A beggar talks to a wealthy man. After explaining how much he is
struggling, the beggar borrows the equivalent of $50. Later that same day, the wealthy man runs across the beggar in a restaurant, and the beggar is eating a gourmet dish of salmon with mayonnaise sauce. The wealthy man reproaches him, “What? You borrow money from me and then order yourself salmon with mayonnaise sauce? Is that what you've used my money for?” The beggar replies, “I don't understand you. If I haven't any money I can't eat salmon with mayonnaise sauce, and if I have some money I mustn't eat it. Well, then, when am I to eat salmon with mayonnaise sauce?”

You may be surprised to hear what Freud makes of this joke and others like it. He notes, “What these jokes whisper may be said aloud: that the wishes and desires of men have a right to make themselves acceptable alongside of exacting and ruthless morality.” In other words, the joke recognizes that people have underlying desires for pleasure and satisfaction and those desires are powerful. The beggar wants to eat salmon with mayonnaise, and he does not care that he has to break society’s rules in order to do so. Freud declares, “Every honest [person] will end by making this admission, at least to [one]self,” that, if our life is not sufficiently "enjoyable,” we will not be able “to stifle the voice within us that rebels against the demands of morality” (S.E. 1905, 8: 110). In other words, Jewish jokes such as this one expressed the view that people have a personal and powerful desire for pleasure—including sexual pleasure, I would add—and those desires remain forceful despite the moral restrictions that are meant to hold them in.

In conclusion, Freud’s being Jewish had the fundamental effect of putting him outside of the majority culture and freeing him to disagree with the conventional ways of explaining the workings of the mind. It also provided him with certain assumptions that came to underlie psychoanalysis. Jewish culture formed key components of what he called his “intellectual constitution.” The factors that I have emphasized are: the willingness to question the conventional givens; the belief that circumstances are not as they appear to be on the surface, because there is a complicated inner world that produces a person’s behavior; a recognition of the great importance of sexuality, in contrast to the conventional view of the time; and the powerful conflict between a person’s desire for pleasure and the forces of morality that are arrayed against such desires.

James William Anderson, PhD, is Professor of Clinical Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Northwestern University; a faculty member at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis; Editor of the Annual of Psychoanalysis; and a member of the Editorial Board of this publication. A specialist in psychobiography, he has published papers on such figures as William and Henry James, Edith Wharton, Sigmund Freud, Woodrow Wilson, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Dr. Anderson may be contacted at j-anderson3@northwestern.edu