

Freud's Theory of Jewishness

For Better and for Worse

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On September 30, 1934, Freud wrote a letter to his friend Arnold Zweig, in which he announced that he had begun a new work: "Faced with the new persecutions," he wrote, "one asks oneself again how the Jews have come to be what they are and why they have attracted this undying hatred [*unsterbliche haß*]. I soon discovered the formula: Moses created the Jews."¹ In this letter, Freud alludes to a provocative thesis at the heart of his final book, *Moses and Monotheism*: the origins and persistent survival of the Jewish people, he suggests, may be inextricably linked to the origins of the "undying hatred" of Jews and Judaism. According to Freud, these phenomena are neither divine nor predetermined, but rather a matter of choices made by humans living in historical time. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud developed a theory of Jewishness that was both racial and cultural, both hereditary and historical. Within this complicated narrative, he implies that regardless of any attempts to repress, suppress or repudiate Jewishness, the Jewish tradition will survive, for better or for worse.

Central to Freud's theory is the idea that Jewishness is constituted by the biological inheritance of an archaic memory that Jewish people are inexorably compelled to transmit to future generations, whether consciously or unconsciously. According to his version of the story, the Jewish tradition originated when an Egyptian named Moses chose a band of Semites upon whom he imposed a strict monotheism based on the abstract ideals of *Geistigkeit* (or as it is variably translated, intellectual spirituality or intellectuality). Freud was well aware of the historic specificity of this term within German Idealist philosophy, and he took special care to note the range of meaning which *Geist* could suggest—from "spirit" to "ghost" to "breath" which in Hebrew is the same word (*ruach*) as "soul"²—but he refashions the term to fit his definition of Jewish tradition.³ According to Freud, by rejecting the most material and magical elements of "primitive" religions, Mosaic monotheism became supremely spiritual [*geistig*]: it condemned "magical ceremonies," denied the existence of an afterlife and prohibited material representations of the deity.⁴ Whereas "primitive" religions proved their power through material

evidence (such as magical ceremonies and iconic representations of the deity), the power of Mosaic monotheism was always a “hypothesis,” for it existed in a realm *beyond sensory perception*.⁵ Unable to tolerate “such a highly spiritualized [*Vergeistigte*] religion,”⁶ the band of Semites killed Moses (repeating the murder of the primal father described in *Totem and Taboo*). The reason these events were not recorded in the Bible, Freud explains, is that the people repressed the memory of the murder. However, the memory-traces of Moses and his tradition continued to exert their influence. Ultimately, Freud insists that the memory-traces have been inherited “independently of direct communication and of the influence of education.” Explicitly engaging with contemporary theories of evolution and race, Freud insists that this “acquired characteristic” (of Jewishness) has been biologically transmitted from one generation to the next.⁷ According to Freud, then, the biologically inherited memory of Moses constitutes Jewish tradition and compels Jews to be Jewish.

Surprisingly, this racial definition of Jewishness does not detract from Freud's emphasis on the spiritual-intellectual ideals of the tradition. Precisely because the Jewish tradition had reached the heights of ideal abstraction, its survival could not be explained solely by the usual cultural media — not “direct communication” nor “the influence of education by the setting of an example,”⁸ not rituals and not texts. The survival and transmission of Jewish tradition *required* a medium beyond sensory perception and this medium was biological heredity. While the Nazis also made claims about both their superior spirituality and the purity of their own biological material, in Freud's theory of Jewishness these two elements do not simply coexist; they are inseparable: the genealogical transmission both confirms the supreme *Geistigkeit* of the tradition and guarantees its survival. The inextricability of these terms also illuminates the troubled relationship between the persistent survival of Jewish tradition and the “undying hatred” that it persistently elicits.

Since Freud had explored the nature and origins of religious traditions in *Totem and Taboo*, he defensively asserted that *Moses and Monotheism* contained nothing that he had not already explained twenty-plus years before.⁹ Nonetheless, his final book obviously contains a great deal more — and more specific — than the earlier one. In *Totem*, Freud explored the nature and origins of a wide range of religious traditions, but he almost entirely skipped over the Jewish tradition. In *Moses and Monotheism*, he notes that he intends to explore

what the real nature of a tradition resides in, and what its special power rests on ... what sacrilege [*Frevel*] one commits against the splendid diversity of human life if one recognizes only those motives which arise from *material* needs, from what sources some ideas (and particularly religious ones) derive their power to subject both men and peoples to their yoke [*unterjochen*] — to study all this in the *special case* [*Spezialfall*] of Jewish history would be an alluring task.¹⁰

While he begins this passage by referring to “the real nature of tradition” as if it were something universal, he concludes that the present work was driven by

his desire to explore the “special case of Jewish history” — how it was that Jewish tradition had “subjected” generations to its “yoke,” not only through material needs but through something else. In the shift from the universal case of “tradition” to the particular case of Jewish tradition, Freud strangely distinguishes his own work from all others that study tradition. Indeed, the distinction could apply to his life’s work, for psychoanalysis focuses not on how people satisfy their “material needs” — food, water, shelter — but on how and why they are driven to satisfy non-material needs, how they are “subjected” to powers which do not necessarily have any political or legal currency, or ramifications in the material world. The question that Freud addresses in *Moses and Monotheism*, then, is how and why individuals have been regularly convinced that they are Jewish and that they should practice Jewish traditions even as the “Jewish tradition” does not itself satisfy any “material needs.” The transmission and power of Jewish tradition, Freud suggests, rises beyond the realm of material needs, physical satisfactions and manifest powers; it subjects its people to its yoke through its spiritually-intellectual [*geistig*] ideals.

The Jewish tradition has survived at least in part because it has been genealogically transmitted from generation to generation. Since the formulation of Rabbinic Judaism in the Babylonian Talmud, Jewishness has been defined genealogically. Indeed, according to the Rabbis, “one cannot cease to be a Jew even via apostasy,”¹¹ or as Theodor Reik put it in his book on *Jewish Wit*, “once a Jew always a Jew.”¹² Unlike children of Christians or Muslims who may choose to no longer be “counted” as Christian or Muslim, children of Jewish parents are “counted” as Jewish by both Jews and non-Jews, regardless of individual experiences, beliefs or choices. Even when parents attempt to reject or “repress” their Jewishness by not practicing Jewish rituals or by converting and raising their children as non-Jews, such children may still be considered as Jewish: by themselves, by their contemporaries and by history.¹³ A person is Jewish *not* because he believes in a monotheistic god, keeps kosher, circumcises his sons, or any other number of supposedly singularly Jewish beliefs, practices or proclivities. According to Freud, a person is Jewish simply because he inherits the “memory-traces of the experience of our ancestors.”¹⁴ Freud’s theory of Jewishness is compelling precisely because it articulates the racial aspects of culture; it suggests that culture derives from race rather than the other way around. Only when a person has inherited Jewishness does his belief (or disbelief) in a monotheistic God — or his circumcision of his sons, or his affection for Jewish authors and filmmakers, or his support of Israel — represent part of his “Jewish culture.”¹⁵ Otherwise, these are simply affections for things that historically (but not exclusively) have been associated with people who have inherited Jewishness.

In the ongoing debate about Freud’s relationship to *Judentum*, one of the major questions has been whether he felt positively or negatively about it, and whether he saw it as a religion based on spiritual-intellectual ideals, or as a

racial-ethnic identity based on internalized anti-Semitism. It has even been suggested that the racialization of Jewishness is a sort of a psychological problem along the lines of self-hatred, a "temptation" which Freud may have (or should have) resisted.¹⁶ Most scholars who have addressed these aspects of Freud's final book have focused on either his insistence on the biological transmission of memory or his emphasis on Jewish *Geistigkeit*. While their projects are very different, Jan Assmann and Daniel Boyarin both read Freud's spiritualization [*Vergeisterung*] of Judaism as an ironic and defensive inversion of Christian anti-Jewish images of the Jewish people as mired in the materiality of text and flesh.¹⁷

By contrast, Yerushalmi and Gilman have each attend to Freud's peculiar insistence upon a "Lamarckian" notion of heredity, and hence, upon a racial definition of Jewishness—the idea that a person inherits Jewishness, for better and for worse, and regardless of her own feelings, beliefs or practices.¹⁸ In his seminal 1991 work, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable*, Yerushalmi interprets Freud's insistence on this idea as a dangerous separation of "Jewishness" (the ethnic-racial condition of being Jewish) and "Judaism" (the religion sometimes practiced by Jewish people). If Jewishness can be transmitted "independently of direct communication and education by example," he writes (quoting Freud), "then that means that 'Jewishness' can be transmitted independently of 'Judaism,' that the former is interminable even if the latter is terminated."¹⁹ For Yerushalmi, the emphasis on the (often discomfiting) bodily definitions of Jewishness seems to detract from the more "noble and precious" ideals of Judaism. Whereas Yerushalmi and Gilman each concentrate on Freud's ethnic-racial definition of Jewishness, Assmann and Boyarin focus on his construction of the intellectual-spiritual ideals of Judaism. I argue that in his final book, Freud attempts to make sense of the counter-intuitive connections between Jewishness and Judaism and suggests that the *geistig* ideals of Judaism are inseparable from the bodily survival of the Jewish people. Freud insists on an idiosyncratic version of *Geistigkeit* not to deny the body (as Boyarin claims), but to make sense of the "special case" of bodily definition within Judaism.

It is impossible to determine whether Freud's theory of Jewishness should be read as a positive affirmation or an uncomfortable apprehension of the Jewish tradition.²⁰ It is also impossible to determine whether Freud's sense that Jewishness was "ineffaceable" was the result of his Jewish education²¹ or whether it was the result of his "education" in anti-Semitic racism. Lou Andreas-Salomé and many others have wanted to believe that in his last book, Freud presented a positive testimony to the Jewish tradition. In January 1935, she wrote to Freud, responding to his description of his burgeoning work: "What particularly fascinated *me*," she writes, "is a specific characteristic of the 'return of the repressed,' namely, the way in which *noble and precious* elements return despite long intermixture with every conceivable kind of material."²² While this sen-

tence has been repeatedly quoted as evidence that Freud's last book can be read as an affirmation of the better elements of Jewish tradition, it seems instead to raise the question as to why an individual or a people would repress elements which were so "noble and precious." Freud did not solve the problem of whether *Judentum* is a religion or an ethnic-racial identity, but he did explore some of its most perplexing elements without determining whether their survival would be noble or otherwise.

Like many Jewish scholars before and since, Freud re-interprets what has often been regarded as a problematic particularity of the Jewish people: the fact that Jews are Jewish not because of religious beliefs, cultural practices, linguistic abilities or citizenship in a particular land, but because they have apparently inherited Jewishness in their bodies. While the bodily definition of Jewishness has been a source of racist anti-Semitism since at least the fifteenth century,²³ it can be traced to Jewish and Christian texts from the first century C.E.. Since Paul, Christian anti-Judaism has often centered around the idea that while Christianity has apparently ascended to the heights of abstract spirituality [*Geistigkeit*], the Jewish people remain mired in the materiality of the flesh and of the text. Freud seems to appropriate and invert the Christian trope of *Geistigkeit* to define what is most remarkable about the Jews,²⁴ but he ironically uses it to make sense of the most material and bodily element of Jewish definition, namely its genealogical transmission.

Freud's insistence on the biological transmission of Jewishness may seem incompatible with his emphasis on the abstract *geistig* ideals of Jewish tradition, but he develops idiosyncratic versions of the notions of both Jewish genealogy and *Geistigkeit* such that one confirms the other. While he mentions *Geistigkeit* throughout *Moses and Monotheism*, he explores this concept in detail in an oft-discussed section entitled "The Advance in Intellectuality [*Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit*]."²⁵ According to Freud, the most important element of Mosaic monotheism was the "prohibition against making an image of God."²⁶ This single precept had such a "profound effect" that a "new realm of intellectuality [*Geistigkeit*] was opened up," in which "ideas, memories and inferences became decisive in contrast to the lower psychical activity which had direct perceptions by the sense-organs as its content."²⁷ Whereas less *geistig* religions and traditions could be transmitted through material media such as texts, objects, rituals or lands, Jewish tradition was different. (Indeed, such material things can be transformed into idols of worship, thereby displacing the emphasis on pure *Geistigkeit*.) As Assmann has noted, Freud's *Moses* (and psychoanalysis more generally) can be seen as an affirmation of the Jewish aspiration to free the soul from the captivity of compulsive idolatry of the material world.²⁸ What is most remarkable about Freud's *Moses*, however, is that it allows us to think through the racial aspects of Jewishness without becoming mired in the materiality associated with race (i.e., particular physical or phenotypical characteristics).

Yet Freud still needed to contend with the obvious fact that genealogy is a matter of sensuality and sensory perception: (until recently) human reproduction required two bodies engaged in highly sensory activity, and genealogy could be guaranteed by witnessing the baby emerge from the mother's body. This "genealogical guarantee" is precisely what Freud transforms in his theory of Jewishness. Part of the "advance in *Geistigkeit*," he explains, was the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy:

this turning from the mother to the father points in addition to a victory of intellectuality [*Geistigkeit*] over sensuality [*Sinnlichkeit*]—that is, an advance in civilization [*Kulturfortschritt*] since maternity [*Mutterschaft*] is proved by the evidence of the senses while paternity [*Vaterschaft*] is a hypothesis, based on an inference and a premiss. Taking sides in this way with a thought-process in preference to a sense [*sinnliche*] perception has proved to be a momentous step.²⁹

Here Freud knowingly and ironically inverts³⁰ the "matrilineal principle" of Jewish definition in order to establish a masculine *Geistigkeit*³¹ which nonetheless incorporates the body. According to the "matrilineal principle," if the mother is Jewish, the child is also Jewish, whereas if she is non-Jewish (even if the father is Jewish), the child is regarded as non-Jewish.³² Though Rabbinic family law is almost entirely patrilineal, in determining the status of the offspring of mixed marriages it is *matrilineal*.³³ There are many explanations for this particular legal aspect of Jewish definition,³⁴ but the most common—and the most common sense—explanation is that the mother's identity can be "proved by the evidence of the senses" while the father's identity is always "a hypothesis, based on an inference and a premiss."³⁵ Freud "masculinizes"³⁶ the most "feminine" aspect of Jewish bodily definition so that it can remain in a realm beyond sensory perception. He does this not to "rewrite" Jewishness as Aryan (as Assmann suggests) or to reject carnality (as Daniel Boyarin argues),³⁷ but to make sense of the particularity of the bodily definition of Jewishness. Thus, while Freud insists that Jewish tradition is biologically transmitted, he masculinizes the materiality of biology so that it can remain in a realm beyond sensory perception.

By inverting the "matrilineal principle" of Jewish genealogy, Freud produces a particular kind of scientific theory of Jewishness, one which is not bound by the criteria of scientific evidence and proof that were becoming standard in the 1930s. Throughout his career, Freud drew ideas and materials from biological and evolutionary theories, and he regularly expressed an aspiration that psychoanalysis would be regarded as a "science," based on "actual" observations.³⁸ However, with the development of new technologies for documenting observations and for controlling experimental conditions, scientific standards began to be defined by the quality of material evidence (such as photographs) and controlled experimentation.³⁹ If psychoanalysis was a "science," it was one that had almost no access to *material* evidence and whose theories could not be "proved by the evidence of the senses." Psychoanalytic theory was

always “a hypothesis, based on an inference and a premiss.” Nonetheless, Freud could see — or at least was convinced he could see — that psychoanalysis “subjected” people to its power by presenting its hypotheses to its patients rather than by working with physical materials or by fulfilling “material needs.”

So too, Freud observed that Jewish tradition is defined first and foremost by the fact that it does not require material “evidence” in order to “subject” the people to its “yoke.” Rather, what “subjects” them is the “inference” that they have inherited *something*—Jewishness—defined not by “sensory perceptions” but by “abstract ideas,” “memories and inferences.”⁴⁰ Freud’s theory of Jewishness could be considered “scientific” in the sense that it is a “hypothesis” based on observations of the “special case” of Jewish history. However, it is in a different—more *geistig*—realm than those “scientific” attempts to “prove” the genetic unity of all Jews (or at least all priestly males) using material evidence which, though microscopic, depends upon “sensory perception.”⁴¹ According to Freud’s theory, the biological inheritance of Jewishness does not detract from its abstract *geistig* ideals as long as it remains a “hypothesis.” Thus, Freud refigures the materiality of Jewish genealogy as a purely spiritual-intellectual [*geistig*] matter.

In insisting upon both the non-material idealism of *Geistigkeit* and the materiality of biological inheritance, Freud addresses long-standing questions of Jewish embodiment. As Howard Eilberg-Schwartz has suggested, throughout history, “Jewish bodies” have been “doubly damned.” On the one hand, Jews were “inadequately embodied”—pictured as weak feminine men with small or foreshortened penises,⁴² excessively interested in “feminine” concerns such as books, study and the family.⁴³ On the other hand, they were considered overly embodied—pictured as grotesque, hairy, smelly women—and too mired in the flesh—clinging to bodily rituals such as circumcision, *mikvah* (ritual immersion) and genealogical (rather than spiritual) definitions of the group. Over time, two general “strategies” for countering these charges emerged. The first was to “pursue embodiment,”⁴⁴ exemplified most clearly by certain Zionists such as Max Nordau in his fantasy of the “Muscle Jew” but anticipated by the Maccabees’ pursuit of Greek ideals of fitness and bodily perfection. The second strategy was to “flee embodiment through the spiritualization of the tradition,” which was exemplified by various Jewish scholars’ attempts to redefine Judaism as the most *geistig* of religions along Kantian lines.⁴⁵ So too, the popular designation of the Jewish people as the “People of the Book” has, until quite recently, privileged certain disembodied “dimensions of Jewish experience at the expense of others.”⁴⁶ While Freud’s emphasis on the Jews’ “Advance in Spirituality [*Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit*]” seems to similarly privilege the textual and intellectual [*geistig*] aspects of Judaism, it is complicated by his insistence on the genealogical transmission of Jewishness. On the one hand, by refiguring the materiality of Jewish genealogy as proof of the particularity of Jewish *Geistigkeit*, he seems more like those Jewish scholars who would insist

that Judaism is a spiritual tradition of ideals rather than a race, or as one Holocaust-museum website puts it, "Among all the things that Judaism is, the one thing it is not is a race."⁴⁷ On the other hand, his insistence on the genealogical transmission of Jewishness seems more similar to the attempts of Jewish scientists—both in Freud's time and our own—to prove that the Jews are the most pure race rather than a parasitic mongrel group.⁴⁸ However, Freud refuses to make a choice between the two possibilities; he neither rejects the "racial" aspects of Jewish definition nor the "religious" ideals of Judaism. Instead, he develops a theory of Jewishness that incorporates both the racial materiality and the ideal intellectuality [*Geistigkeit*] of the Jewish people.

While Freud insists that the Jewish tradition has been genealogically transmitted, he attends to the image of the Jews as the "People of the Book" and to the ways in which texts transmit certain (if fallible) traces from the past. As he notes, the "pre-eminence given to intellectual labours [*geistigen Bestrebungen*] throughout some two thousand years in the life of the Jewish people has, of course, had its effect."⁴⁹ While this "effect" has been used to portray the Jews as pathetically feeble and overly bookish—that is, as "insufficiently embodied"—Freud inverts this portrayal. Boyarin proposes that Freud "spiritualizes" Judaism as part of a larger attempt to Aryanize and masculinize the Jewish man, but it is precisely in the realm of the body that Freud inverts the entire structure. Rather than "masculinizing" the Jewish man into an image of virile physical power, Freud presents a more complex and discordant image. As he explains, the "Holy Writ and the intellectual concern with it" has not only "held the scattered people together," it has also "helped to check the brutality and the tendency to violence which are apt to appear where the development of muscular strength is the popular ideal. Harmony in the cultivation of intellectual [*geistiger*] and physical [*körperlicher*] activity, such as was achieved by the Greek people, was denied to the Jews. In this dichotomy their decision was at least in favour of the worthier alternative [*Höherwertige*]."⁵⁰ Freud explicitly contrasts the violent brutality and muscular physiques of other peoples against the *Geistigkeit* of the Jews. Yet it is unclear whether either possibility is preferable.

If Moses' "dematerialization of God" was the initial advance in *Geistigkeit*, how have "the Jews retained their inclination to intellectual interests"? How have they preserved their "ideal factor"? The answer is that in killing Moses, the originator of the "ideal factor," the Jews acquired a memory that could never be completely repressed or erased and that would be inexorably transmitted from generation to generation. In *Totem and Taboo* and *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud had explained that the sociality of (all) civilization was initiated by an originary act of violence.⁵¹ As Jacqueline Rose writes, "monotheism, together with the 'advance in intellectuality' that is said to accompany it, takes hold only because of the bloody deed which presided over its birth." The "underlying thesis" is that "there is no sociality without violence, that people are most powerfully and effectively united by what they agree to hate. What

binds the people to each other and to their God is that they killed him.”⁵² It is this act of violence which ultimately makes the Jews Jewish, for it is the memory of this act that causes the Jewish people both to repress *and* to return to the Mosaic religion. After killing Moses, Freud explains,

The Jewish people had abandoned the Aten religion brought to them by Moses and had turned to the worship of another god who differed little from the Baalim [local gods] of the neighboring peoples. All the tendentious efforts of later times failed to disguise this shameful fact. *But the Mosaic religion had not vanished without leaving a trace; some sort of memory of it had kept alive — a possibly obscured and distorted tradition.* And it was this tradition of a great past which continued to operate (from the background, as it were), which gradually acquired more and more power over people’s minds and which in the end succeeded in changing the god Yahweh into the Mosaic god and in re-awakening into life the religion of Moses that had been introduced and then abandoned long centuries before.⁵³

Indeed, it is only through the complicated processes of the repression of the memory of murder and its re-awakening that the Jewish tradition ultimately ascends to the “heights of abstraction,” initiated by Moses’ aniconic prohibitions. While the Jewish people have not “harmonized” their *Geistigkeit* with physical activity (like the Greeks), their *Geistigkeit* originates from the transcending of a brutal and physical act of violence, and the eventual acceptance of the transcendent monotheism that drove them to commit the act of violence.

Oddly, while Freud builds his narrative around this originary murder, in “The Advance in Intellectuality [*Geistigkeit*],” he does not directly refer to this violent act or to its memory. Instead, he refers to the violence of *other people*, and explains that the Jews “retained their inclination to *geistig* interests” at least in part *because* of this violence. “The nation’s political misfortune taught it to value at its true worth the one possession that remained to it — its literature.”⁵⁴ Here Freud seems to argue that the *text* defines the Jewish people, though he has spent pages and pages speculating about how the Jewish tradition — the memory-traces of the murder of Moses — has survived over innumerable generations, *despite* and *beyond* the tendentious textual distortions, through some means *other than direct communication*. Has Freud momentarily repressed the originary brutal act of murder and replaced it with the brutal and violent tendencies of *others* who cause the Jews their “political misfortunes”? Though the *text* may have remained the most valuable “possession” of the Jewish people, it did not compel them to preserve their tradition, or to be Jewish. It is not the texts that make Jews Jewish, but rather the “permanent imprint” of the Mosaic tradition: distorted, repressed and returned such that Jews continue to feel compelled to *turn* to these texts, to “awaken” the memory-traces that (hypothetically) have been genealogically transmitted. (Nonetheless, one could argue that the genealogical definition of Jewishness was produced and perpetuated through texts such as the Talmud and later commentaries.)

While there are converts to Judaism,⁵⁵ for the majority of Jews, it is the

genealogical inheritance of Jewishness that compels them to embrace this tradition, or to repress, repudiate or return to it. Indeed, according to Freud, repressions and repudiations are evidence of transmission, acknowledgements that there is a presence, that the tradition has been inherited. Why else “repudiate” Jewishness if it is not present?⁵⁶ On a lighter note, this sort of backward logic could be compared to that of the tobacco companies’ argument that smoking does not cause lung cancer. Rather, the tobacco companies argue that it is the genetic predisposition to lung cancer that causes people to smoke.⁵⁷ In other words, an individual’s beliefs do not necessarily cause him or her to feel Jewish and to turn to Judaism. Rather, it is the inheritance of Jewishness (and the subsequent identification of the person as Jewish) that can compel a person to *be* Jewish and to do, practice and have an affinity for particular things that are understood as Jewish. In this respect, we can repeat after Lacan and say that “there is no repression prior to the return of the repressed.”⁵⁸

At least since the Holocaust, there has been a wishful movement to repudiate the racial definition of Jewishness because it seems too close to externally imposed anti-Semitic definitions. Not surprisingly, then, a number of scholars have attempted to reduce or remove these aspects both from Freud’s definition and from Jewish communities’ self-definitions.⁵⁹ Scholars and community leaders have understandably shied away from discussions suggesting that the “racial” definition of Jewishness could be anything more than a historical relic, and with the scientific establishment’s denial of “race” as a useful category since the 1950s, it seemed as if “race” may become a thing of the past.⁶⁰ (Nonetheless, in this first decade of the twenty-first century, there has been a surge of headlines announcing the biomedical usefulness of genetic definitions of racial groups, including the Jews.⁶¹) It may well be true that Jewishness will some day be defined through ritual practices or beliefs rather than through genealogy; as Shaye Cohen has convincingly noted, “the nexus of religion, ethnicity, and nationality [and I would include “race” in this list] was not revealed to the people of Israel by Moses at Mount Sinai but [was] created by historical Jews living in historical time.”⁶² By emphasizing that the genealogical definition of Jewishness was a historical invention rather than a divine act, Cohen implies that this problematic aspect of the Jewish tradition is in-essential to its divine nature and to the continued survival of the Jewish people. By contrast, Freud turns to history in order to understand the persistence — the *Unsterblichkeit* [immortality] — of the Jewish tradition, including the genealogical definition of the Jewish people.

This “racial” definition of Jewishness may indeed be something which is better forgotten and which will eventually slip away into the mists of oblivion. However, we should be careful what we wish for. As Freud notes, when a portion of the painful past “returns from oblivion,” it “asserts itself with peculiar force, exercises an incomparably powerful influence on people in the mass, and raises an irresistible claim to truth against which logical objections remain

powerless.”⁶³ Throughout his life, Freud suggested that the return of the repressed is inevitable. In his final book, he extended this theory to suggest that the Jewish people will survive, despite all reforms, repudiations and repressions. As shocking as this may sound, such a guarantee of the future is not necessarily hopeful, for it could also suggest that the “fixity of identity”—and the violence that is so often legitimated by it—is inescapable.

Yet what is perhaps most radical about Freud’s theory of Jewishness is not its racial element, but the historical and human origin of this element. Rather than making Jewish difference a matter of divine election, Freud insists that the Jews were chosen by the man Moses, that is, by a human living in historical time. According to Freud’s version of the story, the most decisive historical act was not Moses’ choice of the Jews, but their own violent act of murder as well as their subsequent efforts to make sense of these decisive acts.⁶⁴ The discomfort—and strength—of Freud’s theory of Jewishness is the notion that the repressed *returns* and that we cannot predetermine whether the return will be for better or for worse. We can, however, take historical and human actions to work through these returns and to sustain the more “noble and precious” elements in the future.

Notes

1. Freud to Zweig, September 30, 1934, Sigmund Freud and Arnold Zweig, *The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Arnold Zweig*, trans. Elaine Robson-Scott and William Robson-Scott (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1970), 91.

2. See Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, S.E., vol. XXIII (1939), 99. In order to maintain consistency, I include the German wherever Freud uses the word *Geistigkeit* or *geistig(e)*. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Freud’s work are from James Strachey, ed., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (S.E.), trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953).

3. Michael Mack explores the relationship between Freud’s thought and the German Idealist tradition in much more detail. Specifically, he suggests that Freud ironically inverted Kant’s proposal that Christ was a revolutionary who inaugurated “an overthrow” of Jewish moral philosophy and thereby “turned the tables on Kant by shedding light on reason’s irrationality.” See Michael Mack, *German Idealism and the Jew: The Inner Anti-Semitism of Philosophy and German Jewish Responses* (2003), 152, 154.

4. See Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 151.

5. “The new realm of intellectuality [*Geistigkeit*] was opened up, in which ideas, memories and inferences became decisive in contrast to the lower psychical activity which had direct perceptions by the sense-organs as its content.” Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 113.

6. *Ibid.*, 47.

7. *Ibid.*, 99–100.

8. *Ibid.*, 99.

9. As he explains in the March 1938 Prefatory note to the third essay of *Moses and Monotheism*, “Not that I should have anything to say that would be new or that I did not say clearly a quarter of a century ago.” See *Ibid.*, 55.

10. *Ibid.*, 52–53, my emphasis.

11. Though the early Rabbis attempted to construct a Judaism based solely on practice and faith, Boyarin notes that in the Babylonian Talmud they rejected this option, “proposing instead the dis-

tinct ecclesiological principle: 'An Israelite, even if he sins, remains an Israelite.' Daniel Boyarin, "The Christian Invention of Judaism: The Theodosian Empire and the Rabbinic Refusal of Religion" *Representations* 85 (2004): 22.

12. "The story is told in New York of the banker Otto Kahn and the humorist Marshall P. Wilder who was a hunchback. Strolling along Fifth Avenue, Kahn pointed to a church and said: 'Marshall, that's the church I belong to. Did you know that I once was a Jew?' Wilder answered: 'Yes, Otto, and once I was a hunchback.'" Theodor Reik, *Jewish Wit* (New York: Gamut, 1962), 90.

13. This was true for a number of Freud's contemporaries, including his own sons, not to mention Disraeli, who is generally regarded as the first Jewish prime minister of England though he was raised as a Christian. When Max Graf (the father of "Little Hans") asked Freud whether he should raise his son as a Jew or have him baptized, Freud responded, "If you do not let your son grow up as a Jew, you will deprive him of those sources of energy which cannot be replaced by anything else. He will have to struggle as a Jew, and you ought to develop in him all the energy he will need for that struggle. Do not deprive him of that advantage." In other words, even if you do not raise him as a Jew, he will be regarded as such. Since he has inherited Jewishness, you should let him know what it means to "be" a Jew from an insider's perspective. See Max Graf, "Reminiscences of Professor Sigmund Freud," *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 11 (1942): 473. See also Jay Geller, "The Godfather of Psychoanalysis: Circumcision, Antisemitism, Homosexuality, and Freud's 'Fighting Jew,'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67.2 (1999).

14. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 99.

15. On this point, Michael Kramer has argued that all definitions of Jewish literature proceed from a racial definition of Jewishness. His essay in *Prooftexts* elicited a heated debate in which the respondents seemed to protest a bit too much against Kramer's argument. See Michael P. Kramer, "Race, Literary History, and the 'Jewish Question.'" *Prooftexts* 21.3 (2001).

16. Jacques Le Rider goes so far as to suggest that a racial definition of Jewishness is a psychological problem that "Freud radically overcame," forgoing the "temptation of falling back into 'biological,' 'hereditary,' and 'racial' representations of the Jewish identity." Jacques Le Rider, "Jewish Identity in *Moses and Monotheism*," *The Psychohistory Review* 25 (1997): 247. Similarly, Richard Bernstein argues that the racialization of Jewishness is incompatible with its noble and precious ideals: "Freud explicitly denies the importance of biological transmission and *positively* asserts the importance of an 'ideal factor' in Jewish survival." Richard J. Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 113.

17. See Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*; "Der Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit. Sigmund Freuds Konstruktion des Judentums," *Psyche* 2.56 (2002); Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

18. See Sander L. Gilman, *Freud, Race, and Gender* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Larry Stewart, "Freud Before Oedipus: Race and Heredity in the Origins of Psychoanalysis." *Journal of the History of Biology* 9 (1976); Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).

19. Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable*, 90.

20. As Yerushalmi has noted, "the sense that Jewishness is both inherited and indelible" is "shared equally by Jews who ... would discard their Jewish identity if they could, as well as by Jews who passionately affirm[] that identity." *Ibid.*, 32.

21. Yerushalmi amply demonstrates that Freud's knowledge of Judaism was much broader than Freud liked to publicly proclaim. See *Ibid.*

22. Lou Andreas-Salomé to Freud, January 1935, Sigmund Freud and Andreas-Salomé, *Letters*, trans. William and Elaine Robson-Scott, ed. Ernst Pfeiffer (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1972 [1966]), 206. Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*, 119; Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable*, 78.

23. See Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Assimilation and Racial Anti-Semitism: The Iberian and the German Models*, *Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture* (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1982).

24. See Assmann, "Der Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit. Sigmund Freuds Konstruktion des Judentums," 166-167; "The Advance in Intellectuality: Freud's Construction of Judaism," *New Perspectives on Freud's Moses and Monotheism*, eds. Ruth Ginsburg and Ilana Pardes (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006), 16.

25. That Freud saw the "Advance in *Geistigkeit*" as the "quintessence" of his work is evidenced

by the fact that he had his daughter Anna read this section as a ventriloquized lecture at the 1938 Psychoanalytic Congress in Paris. Indeed, even as he thought he might not publish the work in its entirety, he published this section separately in the winter of 1939. See Assmann, "Der Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit. Sigmund Freuds Konstruktion des Judentums," 157; Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*, 82–89.

26. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 113.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Assmann, "Der Fortschritt in der Geistigkeit. Sigmund Freuds Konstruktion des Judentums," 169.

29. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 114.

30. See Jan Assmann, *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung: oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (Wien: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2003), 166–167.

31. Boyarin calls this a "masculine *Geistigkeit*." See Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, 260.

32. It is possible, though unlikely, that Freud did not know that Jewishness is transmitted through the mother's rather than the father's genealogy. However, he probably would not make such a big point — insisting on it twice — about the "preference for paternity" if he did not know that the rabbi generally "prefer" maternity over paternity in determining whether a child is Jewish.

33. Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 264.

34. See *Ibid.*, 263ff.

35. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 114.

36. Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*.

37. More explicitly, Boyarin argues that by rejecting the carnality of the Jews, Freud masculinizes them: "Where the Jews have been accused of carnality and, therefore, of being like women, Freud ... would demonstrate that they are more spiritual, and more rational, than the Others, and therefore more masculine than the accusers themselves.... Freud set out to counter antisemitic charges that Jews are not spiritual but carnal, female and not male." *Ibid.*, 246, 253.

38. Sigmund Freud, "Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psycho-Analysis," *S.E.*, vol. XII (1912); "Lines of Advance in Psycho-Analytic Therapy," *S.E.*, vol. XVII (1919); *The Future of an Illusion*, *S.E.*, vol. XXI (1927).

39. See Léon Chertok and Isabelle Stengers, *A Critique of Psychoanalytic Reason: Hypnosis as a Scientific Problem from Lavoisier to Lacan*, trans. Martha Noel Evans, in collaboration with the authors (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

40. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 113.

41. See Nadia Abu El-Haj, "'Bearing the Mark of Israel?': Genetics and the Quest for Jewish Origins," Unpublished draft [personal communication] (2004). See also John M. Efron, *Defenders of the Race: Jewish Doctors and Race Science in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); Raphael Falk, "Zionism and the Biology of the Jews," *Science in Context* 11.3–4 (1998).

42. Sander Gilman has thoroughly explored the ways in which Jewish bodies and bodily parts have been portrayed, specifically in terms of penises, feet, noses, smells and hair. See Sander L. Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991); *Creating Beauty to Cure the Soul: Race and Psychology in the Shaping of Aesthetic Surgery* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

43. See Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, 244ff.

44. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 5. See also Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, 246–248. More recent revivals of the "Tough Jew" can be found in the revival of the Maccabees' "heroic" story, the delight in Alan Dershowitz's "tough" *chutzpah*, and the romanticization of Jewish gangsters in two books titled, *Tough Jews*. See Paul Breines, *Tough Jews: Political Fantasies and the Moral Dilemma of American Jewry* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990); Rich Cohen, *Tough Jews: Fathers, Sons and Gangster Dreams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998).

45. See for example, Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, 246ff; Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1972).

46. Eilberg-Schwartz, *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, 1. For

the recent return to matters of the (Jewish) body, see the recent essay by Kirshenblatt-Gimblet which documents the emerging split in Jewish Studies between the new "Berkeley (or California) school" of studies of the "People of the Body" and the older (east coast-based) school of studies of the "People of the Book." Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblet, "The Corporeal Turn." *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95.3 (2005).

47. Florida Holocaust Museum, *What Is Judaism?* 2003, Available: http://www.fhlocaustmuseum.org/history_wing/antisemitism/related_topics/judaism.cfm, September 26, 2005.

48. To counter William Z. Ripley's claims that the Jews were not a race, Joseph Jacobs argued that they were the most pure race. Joseph Jacobs, "Are Jews Jews?" *Popular Science Monthly* 55 (1899); *The Jewish Race: A Study in National Character* (London: Privately printed, 1899); William Z. Ripley, "The Racial Geography of Europe: A Sociological Study, Supplement: The Jews." *Popular Science Monthly* 54 (1899). By contrast, Maurice Fishberg went to anthropological lengths to demonstrate that the Jews were not a distinct racial group. Maurice Fishberg, *The Jews: A Study of Race and Environment* (New York: Walter Scott, 1911). See also Abu El-Haj, "'Bearing the Mark of Israel?' Genetics and the Quest for Jewish Origins.;" Efron, *Defenders of the Race: Jewish Doctors and Race Science in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*; Falk, "Zionism and the Biology of the Jews"; Eric L. Goldstein, "'Different Blood Flows in Our Veins': Race and Jewish Self-Definition in Late Nineteenth Century America." *American Jewish History* 85.1 (1997).

49. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 115.

50. *Ibid.*

51. In *Civilization and its Discontents* Freud reiterates that he had come to this conclusion by analyzing *Christianity* specifically. "From the manner in which, in Christianity, this redemption is achieved — by the sacrificial death of a single person, who in this manner takes upon himself a guilt that is common to everyone — we have been able to infer what the first occasion may have been on which this primal guilt, which was also the beginning of civilization, was acquired." Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, S.E., vol. XXI (1930), 136. See also Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, S.E., vol. XIII (1913), 153–155.

52. Jacqueline Rose, "Response to Edward Said," *Freud and the Non-European* (New York: Verso, 2003), 75.

53. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 69–70, my italics.

54. *Ibid.*, 115.

55. While the possibility of conversion to Judaism might seem to disprove the purely genealogical injunction to "be" Jewish, in fact, the process of conversion emphasizes this logic: the "convert is adopted into the [Jewish] family and assigned a new 'genealogical' identity," by receiving a new Jewish name whose ending is "ben Avraham" or "bas Avraham" (son or daughter of Abraham). See Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 240–241.

56. Following Jan Assmann's argument about the mnemohistory of Egypt, one could argue that for a person to "successfully" convert (away from Judaism, in this case), she must continue to remember her past. As Assman writes, "Conversion defines itself as the result of an overcoming and a liberation from one's own past which is no longer one's own. Remembering their disowned past is obligatory for converts in order not to relapse." Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, 7.

57. I thank Geoffrey Bowker for suggesting this comparison.

58. Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 14.

59. See, for example, Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses*.

60. Of course, in America and elsewhere, "race" is not a thing of the past and it is not simply "genealogical": skin color continues to function as a way of ascertaining whether a person is likely to have experienced racism.

61. See Jenny Reardon, "Race and Human Difference in a Genomic Age," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 15.3 (2004).

62. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*, 348.

63. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 85.

64. Ruth Ginsburg's essay compliments my point here: The primary trauma is "the experience of being aggressive perpetrators. Only in the second place is it the trauma of a persecuted victim." See Ruth Ginsburg, "Whose Trauma Is It Anyway? Some Reflections on Freud's Traumatic His-

tory," *New Perspectives on Freud's Moses and Monotheism*, eds. Ruth Ginsburg and Ilana Pardes (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2006), 80.

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