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Wandering Jews: From Galicia to Vienna

The Break with Tradition

The break with tradition, the theme that preoccupied the great theorists of modernity – Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber – was also at the center of Freud’s life and work. In his case, in fact, the topic held a particularly visceral meaning, for his family had experienced all the dislocating effects of that historical rupture directly. In the course of three generations, the Freuds went from being parochial Ostjuden, Eastern European Jews living in the constricted world of Galician Jewry on the eastern periphery of the Austrian Empire, to secularized Jews inhabiting one of the most cosmopolitan capitals of Western Europe.

For observant Jews, tradition was a chain consisting of the uninterrupted transmission of the Torah from one generation to the next, and there is no doubt that Freud’s father, Jacob (1815–1896), had been raised in that tradition. Jacob’s father, Schlomo, was a rabbi, although whether orthodox or Hassid is unclear. What is certain, however, is that Schlomo saw to it that his son received a thorough education in the sacred texts and that Jacob perused them all his life; we have his granddaughter’s observation that Schlomo was studying Talmud in Aramaic as an old man in Vienna.¹

There is also no doubt that Jacob wanted to pass the tradition on to his son, Sigmund. But the unorthodox – or post-traditional – way in which he chose to do it attests to the fact that the hitherto seamless continuity of tradition had been broken. Jacob’s actions provide an invaluable artifact for deciphering the inner tensions he experienced as a man with one

foot in the world of traditional Jewry and the other in secular modernity. He did not require Sigmund to spend long hours hunched over the Gemarah, the Talmud and its commentaries, as he had done. Instead, when Sigmund was seven, Jacob began reading the family Bible to him – something the precocious young boy would soon be able to do on his own. Significantly, the book in question was the *Israelitische Bibel*, published by Ludwig Philippson, a prominent scholar of both religious and secular subjects, and his brother Phoebus. The choice of the Philippson Bible represents an altered relation to the chain of tradition and tells us much about Jacob’s own relation to the customs and teachings of his forefathers.

As was customary, the Freud family Bible contained a *Gedenkblatt*, the commemorative page on which the significant events in the family’s history were recorded. Jacob inscribed only four entries on the *Gedenkblatt*; the first was the date he purchased the Philippson Bible – 1 November 1848. That was a seminal year for Europe in general, when the storms of revolution – and headwinds of reaction – blew across the continent and disturbed the lives of many Jewish communities. At the time, Jacob was living in the town in which he was born, Tysmenitz in Galicia, which had been part of Poland until 1772, when it was annexed by the Austrian Empire, of which it remained a part until the end of the First World War. In Galicia in general and in Tysmenitz in particular, many of the conflicting currents destabilizing Jewish life in the mid-nineteenth century converged, and “the old traditions, and hence the organization of the Jewish community, were being fundamentally challenged.” The three major strands of Judaism – orthodox rabbinism, Hasidism, and the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment – were at loggerheads with one another, and their clash constituted a challenge to traditional authority that was unsettling in the extreme.

Galician Judaism was a thoroughly communal affair, and the Halakha, the traditionally sanctioned body of law, encompassed all aspects of that way of life. The extreme poverty of the *shtetl* and the precariousness of life in general meant that mutual support and solidarity were absolutely essential for physical survival. In fact, as noted by psychoanalyst

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Ana-Maria Rizzuto, physical survival was not a certainty; “many Jews” in the region “died of starvation . . . in spite of community efforts.” Collective cohesiveness was essential in this context, and the individual was under enormous pressure to conform to the regulations governing almost every moment of the day. A challenge to the cohesion of this closed community, with its “long-established theological and ritualistic system of thought and activity,” constituted a threat not only to the collective identity of the group but also to the very existence of its members.

The first threat came from Hassidism, a movement that challenged the authority of the orthodox rabbis by criticizing their formalism, scholasticism, and legalism, presenting instead a simple and comforting teaching that stressed emotion, spiritualism, and everyday experience. Freud believed that his father might originally have been a Hassid, but whatever Jacob’s early exposure to Hassidism, another movement came to play a decisive role in his life: the Haskalah – the Jewish Enlightenment that modeled itself on the German Aufklärung – which sought to advance the process of the physical and spiritual de-ghettoization of the Jews begun with the Napoleonic reforms (1806–1808). Partisans of the Haskalah, known as maskilim, wanted to transform the Jewish tradition so that its member would achieve full participation in the wider world of modernity. Though secular and progressive, the maskilim were neither anti-religious nor anti-clerical per se. They were not, in other words, Yiddish-speaking philosophes; rather, they opposed only what they considered the atavistic elements in traditional Judaism and favored adopting the civic values of the host culture as well as its manners and mode of dress.

The Hassidim were utterly hostile to these radical and secular tendencies, while the maskilim were no less suspicious of Hassidic superstitions and magical practices. Ironically, however, by daring to criticize the rabbis, the Hassidim had demonstrated that the absoluteness of traditional authority could be challenged; they thereby unwittingly opened the door for the critique of orthodoxy in general and for the Haskalah’s rationalist critique in particular.

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The maskilim passed through that door and set out to integrate their faith in God, Judaism, and the Torah with the advances of the Enlightenment – that is, “to transilluminate the substance of the Scriptures and the Talmud with the vision and the wisdom of the Aufklärung.”

This led them to oppose the rabbinical prohibition on secular learning and to advocate the teaching of European science, philosophy, language, and literature as part of a Jewish education. But while they rejected the narrow Talmudism of orthodox studies, the supporters of the Haskalah retained the Bible as a centerpiece of the educational process. Exalted as a humanist text belonging to world literature – a work on a par with the Odyssey or The Divine Comedy – the study of the Bible was seen as a way to promote perhaps the most cherished value of the German Enlightenment, namely, Bildung (properly cultured character formation). That was precisely what the Philippson Bible represented; it is, and as the noted French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu observes, a product of the Haskalah par excellence.

In addition to the emphasis on secular learning, the maskilim, rejecting the traditional stress on ritual and ceremonialism, focused on Judaism’s ethical teaching – especially its emphasis on truth and justice. Their interpretation of that ethical teaching largely converged with the progressive values of the Enlightenment. Echoing Kant and the leading figure of the Haskalah Moses Mendelssohn, the English translator of the Philippson Bible wrote that the “intellectual cultivation” of the Jewish population “could not fail” to bring about the recognition of “the right of private judgment [that is, the right of critical thinking] . . . and the claims of individual freedom.”

Tysmenitz, while remaining, like Galicia in general, a stronghold of rabbinical orthodoxy, was also a place where the Haskalah flourished. Indeed, “some of the most active maskilim . . . came from Tysmenitz” – many from Jacob Freud’s own generation. This was no doubt due partly to the fact that Tysmenitz was a bustling commercial town. As the experience of

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5 Rizzuto, Why did Freud reject God?, 62.
7 Quoted in ibid., 40.
9 Krüll, Freud and his father, 88.
the Greek seafarer demonstrates, the trader who comes into contact with foreign ways of life often contributes to the erosion of the parochialism of his own local culture and promotes the spread of enlightenment. This happened in Tysmenitz, where Jewish merchants who “regularly attended the great markets of Breslau, Leipzig, and other German cities” brought back the news of what European modernity had to offer and thereby helped Tysmenitz develop into a center of the Haskalah.10

Jacob Freud, according to the historian Marianne Krüll, was among the first group of Galician Jews to “abandon the traditional ways and to build for himself a new life, both intellectually and materially.”11 Although he may not have been a full-blown partisan of the Enlightenment, he did become a new type of Jew, one “deeply anchored in both the Jewish religious and scholastic traditions” but enthusiastic about the modernizing tendencies in European culture.12 Although, as Rizzuto observes, “there is no documented information to help us understand” the process that brought about this “drastic change” in Freud’s father, there is one meaningful and suggestive piece of evidence concerning the outcome of that transformation, namely, the 1848 purchase of the bilingual Philippson Bible.13

One possibility is that Jacob purchased the Philippson in order to participate in a “Reading and Cultural Circle,” established in Tysmenitz that year, that was dedicated to spreading the principles of the Haskalah.14 The year itself, as noted, was significant for the tide of revolutions that swept through Europe and the radical reforms that followed them; among other changes, these reforms “heralded a new epoch for the Jews.”15 De jure if not de facto, the feudal system was abolished, and Austrian Jews were granted their full political and civil rights as a result of these upheavals. In fact, the events of 1848 confronted Galician Jews with the choice, as Rizzuto observes, of either “integrating into an emancipated and educated bourgeoisie or retreating into a secluded, homogeneously observant

10 Ibid., 84.
11 Ibid., 71.
13 Rizzuto, Why did Freud reject God?, 41.
14 See Krüll, Freud and his father, 88.
15 Ibid., 95.
Jewish community.” Jacob’s acquisition of that particular Bible in that particular year suggests that the wave of progressive developments led him to choose the first option.

The Philippson family behind the Israelitische Bibel played a prominent role in the Haskalah as well as in Reform Judaism. The Philippson Bible, which took sixteen years to complete, was “a work of serious scholarship in the spirit of the Wissenschaft des Judentums (Science of Judaism) movement,” the nineteenth-century movement that sought to apply the most sophisticated methods of contemporary scholarship to the study of Judaism.16 A typical page of the new Bible showed the Hebrew text of the Old Testament on one side, its German translation on the other, and extensive notes at the bottom. The notes presented not just important works of Jewish and Christian exegesis and commentary, but also scholarly entries from such diverse fields as anthropology, ancient history, comparative mythology, religion, medicine, and even the botany of the Near East – all of which were meant to expand the reader’s appreciation of the Old Testament. More striking still, the Philippson Bible contained 685 illustrations meant to evoke the historical, cultural, and physical context of the biblical narrative. These illustrations depicted biblical landscapes, towns, plants, animals, marketplaces, coins, utilitarian objects from everyday life, and even Egyptian gods, that is, images of foreign deities.17 As Jacob Freud surely knew, these elements of the text he chose to purchase would have been condemned as sacrilegious – specifically, idolatrous – in the orthodox world of Judaism in which he had been raised.

The Philippson Bible that Jacob read to Sigmund was in effect the medium in which he introduced the Jewish tradition to his son. The impact was likely twofold: Exposure to the rich content and Enlightenment orientation of this very singular edition of the Bible had “an enduring effect upon the direction of [Freud’s] interest,” while we can also assume that the pleasure and intimacy the young Sigmund experienced while

17 Rizzuto masterfully demonstrates the important role these images came to play in Freud’s fantasy life. See Rizzuto, Why did Freud reject God?, especially chapters 6 and 7.
reading the Bible with Jacob had no less of an impact on his development than the content he absorbed from the text.18

_Wissenschaftlich_ the Philippson Bible certainly was, but its intent was not to debunk. Rather, the purpose was to enhance religious experience and deepen one’s understanding of the tradition by drawing on everything human knowledge had to offer. Yet whatever their intentions, by treating the biblical text as an object of science rather than of exegesis, the Philippsons contributed to the undermining of tradition. It was not simply an absence of secular education that had prevented Jews from reflecting on their fundamental beliefs before the nineteenth century. Such reflection simply could not arise within their closed worldview; it was literally unthinkable. Among the orthodox, the belief that the Torah was “of Divine origin and therefore immune to such critical scrutiny” was “thoroughly ingrained.”19 A tradition is only a tradition in the strict sense when it is structurally impossible to reflect on its basic tenets – on the fundamental “idols of the tribe” – especially from an external standpoint. The basic tenets are taken for granted and, to paraphrase Winnicott, the idea of questioning them simply does not arise.20 To treat a people’s tradition reflectively, as one social formation and belief system among many that emerged out of contingent historical forces – for example, to scientifically objectify the Jewish tradition and its beliefs as the Philippsons did – is to deprive it of its strictly traditionalist character.

As the vehicle Jacob employed to transmit his twofold legacy to Sigmund, the Philippson Bible unwittingly subverted his attempt. In line with the ideals of the Haskalah, Jacob had wanted Sigmund to be both religious and modern. Using the enlightened _Israelitische Bibel_ as the orthodox used the Torah and other sacred texts, he sought to instill a feeling for his people’s beliefs, stories, customs, values, and laws, as well as a sense of piety in his son. And Freud had no doubt about the impact that the “deep engrossment in the Bible story” had on him.21 Jacob, however,

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19 Rice, _Freud and Moses_, 89.
20 Thus, even if one chooses to retain the beliefs of a tradition after critically reflecting on them, the manner in which one holds the same beliefs has been radically altered. In other words, one cannot choose to be a traditionalist.
not only passed the contents of the Bible on to his son via the Philippson version of the text; at the same time, he implicitly introduced Sigmund to the Philippsons’ reflective approach to the holy text. And the latter ultimately eclipsed the former. For the precocious boy that Freud surely was, the scholarly footnotes too may have been influential, even at a relatively early age. Furthermore, the illustrations, which offered “a broad view of many other nations, other peoples and landscapes,” as Rizzuto observes, must have produced a de-centering, Herodotian, anthropological attitude in Freud. They transported him beyond the parochial confines of Leopoldstadt, the crowded Jewish district in Vienna where he grew up. “The child exposed to this pictorial universe,” as Rizzuto puts it, “became the man with boundless curiosity.”22 While Freud thoroughly absorbed the content of the Old Testament, he came to treat it as data – historical, anthropological, and social-scientific. In other words, it became objectified – that is, it became the subject matter for scientific exploration and interpretation that could reveal essential facts about human nature rather than the source of religious inspiration.

As followers of the Haskalah, Jacob and the Philippson brothers believed that religious faith and science were not incompatible. Critical reflection, so they believed, would not necessarily lead to the subversion of faith. In Freud’s case, however, as in that of many others, a scientific examination of religion led to its rejection. After all, it was not a particularly large step from the Wissenschaft des Judentum, as Freud was introduced to it in the footnotes of the Philippson Bible, to Feuerbach, the young Hegelian who provided the template for both the Marxian and the psychoanalytic critiques of religion and who became Freud’s favorite philosopher during his university years. Sigmund Freud moved beyond his father’s tension-filled position, suspended between the world of Jewish traditionalism and the world of European modernity, and became a thoroughly secular Jew – “a godless Jew” – and, as such, a major figure in the project of autonomy.

Jacob’s “Second First-Born” Son

The parochialism of the Eastern European shtetl is only one side of the Jewish experience. Another is the ability to leave the safety and familiarity of one’s home, either by choice or under duress, venture into the

22 Rizzuto, Why did Freud reject God?, 118.
unknown, and attempt to create a better life. It is striking that Jacob Freud, like many of his coreligionists, was registered as a Wanderjude (wandering Jew), the near-mythical term Galician officials used to register the merchants who traveled outside the province in order to make a living. It is not known what motivated Jacob’s choice — he may have already experienced difficulty making a living on his own — but by 1844, at the age of twenty-nine, he entered into partnership with his maternal grandfather Siskind Hoffman, a merchant who had been plying his trade for forty years between Galicia and the westward province of Moravia. From then on, the two men “traveled perpetually between Galicia” and the Moravian town of “Freiberg, trading wool, woolen fabrics, suet, honey, anise, hides, salt and similar raw products.”

Even if it was not the allure of modernity that initially drew Jacob out of Tysmenitz, he would have been exposed to its attractions once he began his travels. Moravia was located about 150 miles northeast of Vienna and lay closer to the center of the Empire. The Austrians therefore had more reason to integrate it into the Empire’s legal system and administrative codes — which meant aggressively pushing for Jewish assimilation there — than in the distant eastern provinces. Nevertheless, anti-Jewish regulations were more stringently enforced in Moravia. Consequently, as Krüll observes, “the new forms of life had most probably been further disseminated . . . in Moravian Jewish communities . . . than in [Jacob’s] own backward Galicia.”

Freiberg, moreover, was a market town, that is, a place where Jacob would have encountered and observed modern Gentile merchants from other cities in the Empire. We can imagine the influence that these experiences had on this provincial Jew, who, prior to partnering up with his grandfather, had never ventured out of his native town.

During his sojourns in Moravia, Jacob left behind in Tysmenitz his wife, Sally Kanner, whom he had married in 1832, and their two sons Emanuel (b. 1833) and Philipp (b. 1834). We know much about Jacob’s sons because, as Sigmund’s older half-brothers, they played an important role in his life. Little is known, however, about Sally’s background and fate. Did she die? Did Jacob divorce her? No one in the Freud family


24 Krüll, Freud and his father, 91.
seems to mention her in later years. Some scholars believe that she was Jacob’s second wife. This mystery, moreover, is one aspect of a larger problem: Not much is known in general about the years between the time Jacob began his travels and when he settled in Freiberg (1844–1852), especially concerning the transformations in his inner life.

However, there is one piece of evidence that, in addition to the acquisition of the Philippson Bible, documents Jacob’s separation from the world in which he was raised. Prior to the reforms of 1848, Jews in the Austrian Empire did not possess the right of free domicile but had to receive permission from the authorities to take up residence in a particular town. Beginning in 1844, the Freiberg registries indicate that the partners Siskind Hoffman and Jacob Freud continually applied and reapplied for permits to temporarily reside there in order to conduct their affairs. The process went on until 19 October 1847, when Jacob submitted an application only for himself. The reasons for the break from his grandfather are also not known but, for whatever reason, Jacob struck out on his own. On 10 July 1848, the authorities grudgingly issued Jacob a harshly worded letter of “toleration,” granting him residence for only three of the six months he had requested. But the records show that by 1852 Jacob had asserted his right “as a citizen” and “used his newly acquired freedom of residence to leave” the world of the shtetl and move to “the predominately Catholic town of Freiberg.”

There he would be counted among the approximately one hundred Jews in a population of about four thousand. Indeed, the devotion to the Virgin was so intense in Moravia that the province was known as “Marian Garden” – a fact that seems to have had some effect on Freud’s attitude to the figure of the Mother in Catholicism.26

Jacob married Amalie Nathanson (b. 1835) on 29 July 1855. Like Jacob, Amalie was an Ostjuden. She was born in a northeastern Galician town near the Russian border called Brody, spent two years with her older brothers in Odessa, and moved to Vienna with her parents as a child. Jacob Freud met Amalie in the Austrian capital, where he was probably doing business with her father – also named Jacob – who was ten years his senior. The marriage was most likely an arrangement between Freud and Nathanson,

25 Rizzuto, Why did Freud reject God?, 34.