

Freud and the lodge B'nai B'rith "Wien": the modernity of the reflections on Jewish identity

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Reflections of Sigmund Freud address at B'nai B'rith, Vienna, on modern concept of ethnic identity. Crucial remarks refer to Jewish identity outside religion.

Key words: Freud, identity

Preamble

The concept of identity is extremely complex in so far as it is linked to the subject's perception of belonging to multiple social circles, of an individual and collective past that he himself pieces together or that the society to which he belongs presents to him, of the place that he is recognised as filling...

Ever since the French Revolution and the opportunity of integration afforded to the Jews into the cultural environment of a society in the midst of secularisation, the perception that the latter have of their Jewishness has become problematic. What characterises the Jewish identity when it is no longer linked with Tradition ? That is the question that Freud and his fellow-members of B'nai B'rith in Vienna asked themselves.

B'nai B'rith International and the lodge "Wien"

B'nai B'rith was founded in New York in 1843 by German Jewish immigrants. Its first president was Isaac Dittenhoefer. His successor, Henry Jones (Heinrich Jonas), is regarded as the true founder of the organisation that initially bore the name of "Bundes-Brüder". Its Hebraic name means "Sons of the Covenant" and laid more emphasis on unity than on religion. B'nai B'rith's goal at the outset was to help Jewish immigrants become integrated into the ambient American culture and carry on charitable activities amongst the poorest immigrants.

In Europe, the surge of anti-Semitism was at the root of the Jews' decision to establish unions. In 1882, the first European B'nai B'rith lodge, called the "Lodge of

the Germanic Empire”, was set up in Berlin. In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the first lodge appeared in Bielitz in Lower Silesia.

In Vienna, the first B’B’ lodge by the name of “Wien” was set up on 13 October 1895 and became the 449th lodge of B’B’ International.

Founded by a group of intellectuals and merchants, the lodge “Wien” possessed particular features that, according to Knoepfmacher (1979), differentiated it from other lodges. This was a society that had a code of ethics based on, and developed within the framework of Judaism, with strict criteria applying to the choice of its members. Attendance at meetings every other Tuesday was compulsory. During meetings, members were required to wear the frock coat. Current matters were followed by a lecture or a debate and supper. In addition to such sessions, there were the activities of the various committees and the social meetings in which families were invited to take part; hence the significant role that the lodge, or the “Verein” as it was called in Vienna, played in the life of its members. The lecturers were academics or experts from various fields, either members or the lodge or guest speakers coming from other lodges. The subjects broached covered a variety of themes.

Freud as a member of B’nai B’rith “Wien”

Freud joined B’nai B’rith “Wien” on 23 September 1897 at the instigation of Edmund Kohn, the first president of this lodge at the time of its founding in 1895. Freud not only attended the meetings on Tuesdays, but he also played tarot with his B’B’ brothers on Saturdays. He took an active part in the tasks of the committees. By way of example, he served on, and at times directed the committee on cultural concerns, which was in charge of organising the lectures, among other things. He was also involved in the work of the arbitration board and the membership committee. In the winter of 1901, he led a debate on “The Goals of B’nai B’rith” and the following year he gave a talk on “The Role of Women in our Association”. In 1906, he got a motion through according to which administrative and organisational matters were no longer to be discussed in plenary session. He was, therefore, a highly active member of B’nai B’rith, for a decade. Thereafter, all his energy went into developing the psychoanalytic movement. From 1923, his illness prevented him from attending B’nai B’rith on a regular basis. However, Freud remained attached to his lodge right to the end.

Thus, on 29 September 1937 the “Verein Wien” eulogised Freud on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of his B’B’ membership. Freud replied in the following letter to the lodge “Wien” in October 1937, which Knoepfmacher copied out (1979), all the documents having been subsequently seized by the Nazis:

“Dear President and Brother,

So, I have lived to see another birthday. Once again, I have been reminded of how unwittingly I have aged. I have truly become a relic of the past, some kind of fossil. If I were to appear at one of the Association’s meetings today, I would see no faces from the past except that of my dear class-mate Dr Wilhelm Knöpfmacher. All those others with whom I have shared so many experiences and who have become so dear to me nowadays have departed there where I shall soon follow.

Each time I am touched to know that the Association remembers me and wishes me good health. Thank you, Mr President and all my brothers, for your letter. The very thing that brought us together will surely not perish with the passage of time."

Basing his arguments on two letters that Freud addressed to his lodge, Dennis B. Klein (1985) shows clearly that Freud sought refuge with B'nai B'rith from ambient anti-Semitic ostracism. In 1926, he wrote, among other things : "I felt like an outlaw, rejected by everyone". Nine years later, he added: "I became one of you, basking in your sympathy, visiting almost without fail the place where I was sure of finding friends when I was surrounded by extreme hostility." And Dennis B. Klein mentions the names of B'B' Wien members who were contemporaries of Freud, such as Wilhelm Knöpfmacher (1898) or Solomon Ehrmann (1902), stressing the fact that without anti-Semitism, B'nai B'rith would not have come into being.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to say that the activities of B'nai B'rith were restricted to the defence of Jewish communities against anti-Semitism.

Reflections within B'nai B'rith and Freud's thoughts on the subject of Judaism and Jewishness

Dennis B. Klein (1985) brilliantly sums up the discussions that took place within B'nai B'rith "Wien" since its founding in 1895. Edmund Kohn, its first president, regularly brought into prominence the fact that B'B' stimulated the best in Judaism and mankind by encouraging each fellow member to embrace the highest moral and ethical precepts. When Freud joined the Society in 1897, he dwelt on the humanitarian concerns of B'nai B'rith and on the appeal that the latter held for him. He owned that such principles and the lodge's homely atmosphere meant a great deal to him and did a great deal for him as well. To understand Freud's awareness of his Jewish identity, one has to try to gain an insight into what humanitarian principles meant for the brotherhood.

The B'nai B'rith "Wien" manifesto entitled "Was Wir Wollen" ("What We Want") and published during Freud's first term as a member, i.e. the fifth term of existence of the lodge "Wien", was drawn up by the then president, Ehrmann, a close friend of Freud's. In that manifesto, Ehrmann lays emphasis on the humanitarian aspects concerning mankind in general, and enlarges upon the perfectibility of the Jewish nation in a global historical and social context. He refers to the Age of the Enlightenment and considers Rousseau, Voltaire and Lessing to be the moral ancestors of modern Jewish life (of his day). He sets B'nai B'rith within the tradition of the Enlightenment and of Jewish religious humanism. He also stresses the importance of the Jewish sense of unity. He neglects, however, in his manifesto, to address the issue of the relationship between B'nai B'rith and the rest of Jewish society. Similarly, he fails to explain why, if it is to strive for the good of humanity in general, B'nai B'rith should be open to Jewish members only.

According to the various sources available to Dennis B. Klein, the discussions were gripping, passionate and highly intellectual... and left many a question unanswered. One gets a sense of having heard it all before...in more recent times!

From the day Freud joined the brotherhood, he undoubtedly partook in such discussions. He went as far as leading the debate on the goals of B'nai B'rith "Wien" in the winter of 1901 and constantly returned to the basic question of his Jewish identity, i.e. the relationship between his attachment to the Jewish community and his general humanistic concerns.

There is no need for our purposes to attempt to define here the exact extent of Freud's knowledge of Jewish culture and faith. In destroying his correspondence, his notes, his journal and his manuscripts on two occasions, first in 1885 on leaving his lodgings at the hospital and then in 1907, Freud did not make the task easy for his biographers. He was certainly a liberal and a non-believer. He turned his wife Martha away from the orthodox traditions in which she had been brought up and religion played no part in his home. We are all well acquainted with Freud's attitude towards religion from his writings, i.e.: *Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices* (1907), *Totem and Taboo* (1912-1913), *A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis* (1923) and *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). In the latter work, Freud puts forward the conviction that humanity will reach a rational, scientific stage from which religion, that illusion, will be excluded.

Within B'nai B'rith "Wien", then, Freud had numerous activities connected with the lodge itself. But the latter served in addition as a forum where Freud expounded his psychoanalytic theories to his fellow-members, who were the first to hear of them even before their publication. It was mainly during the first decade that the lodge gave Freud a chance to come out of his isolation, before his ideas gained ground and he attracted disciples. A noteworthy fact is that he kept silent on subject of religion. Did he wish to refrain from provoking some of his fellow-members? Was his atheism so well known within the lodge that he felt no need to assert it, or alternatively, was it that he did not wish to convince others of his personal opinions? ... Various theories are possible.

According to Dennis B. Klein (1985), Freud gave twenty-one lectures to B'nai B'rith between 1897 and 1917.

- On 7 December 1897 and 3 February 1899: *Traumdeutung (The Interpretation of Dreams)*. According to the meeting's secretary, W. Knoepfmacher, quoted by D.B. Klein, the lecture was very animated and earned Freud a furious applause by the audience. In a letter to Fliess, also quoted by Klein, Freud mentioned this enthusiastic reception.
- In February 1899 (there is a controversy amongst authors concerning 3 February 1899 when, according to H. Knoepfmacher, Freud gave his second Lecture on The Interpretation of Dreams): *Zur Psychologie des Vergessens (La psychologie de l'oubli)*.
- On 4 February 1900: *Das Seelenleben des Kindes (La vie psychique de l'enfant)*. The ideas from these two lectures are incorporated into the book published in 1901, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*.
- 24 April 1900: "*Fécondité*" von Emile Zola (*Fécondité d'Emile Zola*).
- 26 February 1901: *Zufall und Aberglaube (Hasard et superstition)*. Probably incorporated into the last chapter of: *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life Determinisme*.

Croyance au hasard et superstition. Points de vue.

- As mentioned earlier, Freud led the debate, in the winter of 1901, on *The Goals of the B'nai B'rith*, and between 14 January 1902 and 4 May 1902 on *The Role of the Woman in the B'nai B'rith*.

It is known that on this occasion, Freud urged his brothers to work for global humanitarian ideals. This is when Ehrmann drafted the manifesto *Fonction du judaïsme dans l'humanité et du B'nai B'rith dans le judaïsme*.

- On 30 April 1902: *Über Traum (Des Rêves)* at the lodge "Brünn" in Moravia.
- Between 11 March and 30 December 1902 : *Emile Zola*. Zola, whom Freud greatly admired, died on 29 September 1902.
- 16 April 1904: *Über den physiologischen Schwachsinn des Weibes* (Dr Moebius) (*Sur la faiblesse d'esprit physiologique de la femme* by Dr Moebius).
- 1904: *Hammurabi*: sixth king of the Amorite dynasty, founder of the Babylonian empire (approx. 1730 B.C.) The theme was connected with Moses.
- 1905: *Über die Physiologie des Unbewussten* (*La physiologie de l'inconscient*)

These ideas are reiterated in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, also published in 1905.

- 19 March 1907: *Psychologie im Dienste der Rechtspflege* (*La psychologie au service de l'administration de justice*). It was published the same year under the title of: *L'établissement des faits par voie diagnostique et la psychanalyse*.
- On 2 November 1907: *Über den Witz (Le mot d'esprit)*. Lecture given at B'nai B'rith in Prague.
- 1908: *Kindertaufen (Le baptême des enfants)*.
- 1911: *Das Hamlet-Problem (Le problème d'Hamlet)*.
- On 4 November 1913: *Was ist Psychoanalyse? (Qu'est-ce que la psychanalyse?)*
In 1914, he published *Pour introduire le Narcissisme* and *Histoire du mouvement psychanalytique*.
- On 16 February 1915: *Wir und der Tod (Our Attitude to Death)*.

This lecture, given by Freud although he had already established the psychoanalytic movement years ago, attests, according to Dennis B. Klein (1985), to the intellectual relationship that Freud maintained with the Jewish society.

Freud gave that lecture to B'nai B'rith some months before he published *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death* in the journal *Imago*. The second part of that essay, *Our Attitude towards Death* corresponds to the conference held at B'nai B'rith. It is the only lecture given by Freud to B'nai B'rith of which we have the text.

This enables us to identify three major differences between the B'nai B'rith text and the text published in *Imago*.

First of all, Freud recalls from the outset the fear that Jews experience in the face of death and their repression of the problem of death. He goes on to say, however, that this is a universal problem. He recalls that among Jews, when asking someone's age, one adds : "up to a hundred and twenty". He also tells a joke... None of this appears in the text in *Imago* which is intended for a wider audience. Then, the text of the lecture

is written in a much more conversational style.

Thus, he apologises for tackling a painful subject. He also dares to criticise the Jewish faith openly, which has suppressed the impulses of aggression by denying the primary parricidal act. His position as an atheist seems to be common knowledge amongst his brothers.

Finally, Freud omitted in the text in *Imago* those references that are to be found in his lecture to B'nai B'rith regarding his situation in society.

Bernd Nitzschke (1996) also points out that in the “official” text contained in *Imago*, all the Jewish implications have been dropped. As far as I am concerned, there is nothing extraordinary about that, since the fundamental interpretations remain the same and the audience is different. And yet, in spite of everything, it tallies with Freud’s concern that resistance to psychoanalysis would be nourished by ambient anti-Semitism. Furthermore, those examples that appear in the lecture to the lodge “Wien” and that do not figure in the “official” text in *Imago* illustrate, according to Nitzschke, how very much our attitude towards death is linked with love and therefore sexuality.

Let us add that in an exchange of letters between Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud (1932), the latter shows surprising optimism since he concludes in his reply to Einstein’s letter on *Why war?*: “Meanwhile, we may tell ourselves that whatever works towards the development of culture also works against war”.

Freud’s identity

It is important to understand how S. Freud’s fellow members of B'nai B'rith perceived Freud’s relationship with Judaism and Jewishness.

Hitschmann (1926), whom Freud drew into B'nai B'rith and into the psychoanalytic movement, considered Freud’s scientific theories as at once a Jewish contribution of universal nature and an instrument in the struggle against anti-Semitism.

Braun (1936), who joined the lodge “Wien” three years after Freud and served as vice president of the lodge from 1904 to 1905, elaborated the comments made by Hitschmann at the celebration of Freud’s 70th birthday. Braun had been acquainted with Freud since the latter part of the 1880’s, probably as a student when Freud lectured at the university, and forged even closer ties with Freud as his physician from the 1920’s. *Die Persönlichkeit Freuds und seine Bedeutung als Bruder (Freuds Personality and his importance as Brother)*, contains the first attempt to define Freud’s Jewish identity. According to Eduard Braun, there is no question that Freud, in spite of his lack of faith, is genuinely Jewish. For Braun, Jewish identity has three dimensions: the first consists of a state of mind over which religious dogma, conventional moral standards and the world in general hold no sway; the second consists in opposing society and surviving thousands of years of ghettoisation and persecution; the third dimension is one of entirety (*das Ganze*), whereby it is possible to discern the cohesion and indivisibility of nature behind a fragmented and discordant surface and to perceive all human beings as equals. Braun considers that Freud’s opposition to religion, Zionism or other partial aspects of Judaism makes him a *Ganzjude* and that such features account for both his commitment to B'nai B'rith “Wien” and the universalist values of

psychoanalysis. Freud did not attend the meeting and wrote on this subject to Marie Bonaparte on 10 May 1926:

"It would have been embarrassing and in bad taste to attend the meeting. In the face of insults, I can defend myself, but against praise, I am helpless...All things considered, the Jews take me for national hero, when the only service I have ever done the Jewish cause is to have never denied the fact that I am Jewish..."

On the subject of the periodical that B'nai B'rith devoted to him on the same occasion, he had already written to Marie Bonaparte on 26 April 1926:

"They were fairly harmless on the whole. I consider myself to be one of the most dangerous enemies of religion, but they do not look like they suspect it".

It was actually because of his ill-health that Freud was absent from the ceremony organised by the lodge "Wien" on the occasion of his seventieth birthday. He had the chance to read Braun's comments two days prior to the ceremony which inspired his reply, drafted in a letter dated 6 May 1926 and read by his younger brother, Alexander, to the lodge meeting. Recalling his decision to join B'nai B'rith, he wrote :

"It is to my Jewish nature that I owe the two qualities that have become indispensable in the course of my difficult life. Because I was Jewish, I was free of a good many prejudices which restrict others in the use of their intellect : as a Jew, I was prepared to be in the opposition and to abandon the idea of agreeing with the "compact majority". I thus became one of you and I partook your humanitarian and national concerns".

We may say that Freud was well acquainted with Jewish thinking. He was fond of collecting Jewish jokes and witticisms. Of the one hundred and forty examples featuring in his book *Jokes and their Relations to the Unconscious*, one third of them stem from the Jewish tradition.

Conclusion: the modernity of Freud's Jewish identity

According to Dennis B. Klein, Freud's reference to a "Jewish nature" corresponds to a perception of Jewish identity according to Braun's typological conception of the *Ganzjude* and Ehrmann's concept of a *Jewish élan vital*. The two qualities that Freud admits to possessing match the three-point description by Braun of the progressive Jew struggling for equality among human beings and to a similar description by Ehrmann of the function of B'nai B'rith.

The modernity of Freud's Jewish identity, as it was perceived by Freud himself and described by his brothers of B'nai B'rith in gripping and passionate debates, lies in the contemporary nature of the questions surrounding a Jewish identity that is unconnected with religion and where numerous factors interact in a complex manner. Such factors include cultural tradition, teaching of a strict code of ethics, sociological factors of isolation, narcissistic reactions by members of a minority... and above all, loyalty to a community with which there is a shared history and destiny.

It must be added that Freud, who did not manage to define the Jewish identity, had an intuitive understanding of it. Thus, he wrote to Karl Abraham "... do not forget that it is truly much easier for you than for Jung to adopt my views, first, because you are completely independent, and second because racial affinities bring you closer to my

intellectual disposition.” (1961).

This is why I wish to conclude with a quote from Freud (1968) in *An Autobiographical Study*:

“I was born on 6 May 1856 in Freiberg, a small town in present-day Czechoslovakia. My parents were Jewish and I myself have remained Jewish”. This is where we should have begun. But then, raising all these questions would not have been possible. What a shame that would have been!

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Reviewers Comment

The theme of the paper is very interesting and it would be indicated to discuss profoundly how much people who founded B'nai B'rith or entered it later were identifying themselves with the Jews and Judaism. The same question can be asked concerning Sigmund Freud. In spite of Freud's conscious opposition to assimilation and to abolition of his Jewish identity as well as his later membership of B'nai B'rith, he underwent, especially in his younger years, at least some unconscious identification with the enemy: Freud himself confesses clearly that in his youth he had a phase in which he was a strong German nationalist. He was a member of “The book club of German students in Vienna” (Leseverein der Deutschen Studenten Wiens) which

promoted a Dionysian and antiliberal ideology centred on the ideas of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Wagner (Chemouni, 1988). We can even observe in Freud's late theories on Moses (Freud:1939) an ambivalent tendency towards the Jews and Judaism. He writes, for example, in the first essay of his monograph on Moses that „the Mosaic religion was non other than of the Aten – namely, if we had a confession of faith, a declaration. But I fear we shall be told that this path is closed to us. The Jewish confession of faith, as is well known, runs: «Shema Jisroel Elohenu Adonai Echod» («Hear, o Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord»). If it is not merely by chance that the name of the Egyptian Aten (or Atum) sounds like the Hebrew word Adonai (Lord) and the name of the Syrian deity Adonis, but if it is due to a primaeval kinship of speech and meaning, then the Jewish formula might be translated thus: “«Hear, o Israel: Our god Aten (Adonai) is a sole god»”. This passage shows, in my opinion, that in these reflections Freud neglects the fact that God in Hebrew is written Jahve, and since this word, which represents a form of the word “to be” without representing the past, the present, or the future, is not allowed for a religious Jew to be pronounced, it has to be replaced by the word Lord (adon). Freud, therefore, overestimates the word adon, and it seems to be very doubtful that the Jewish Jahwe has such close links with Aten (Atum). His interpretation of the word Adonai would seem that Freud identified himself in this context not so much with the Jews as with the Egyptians, inasmuch as he viewed Moses primarily as an Egyptian, who “communicated” his own religion to the Jews, ... Akhenaten's the Aten religion”. The attitude of Freud towards his Jewishness, therefore, seems not to be explained thoroughly enough in this paper. Also it helps not very much for the understanding of Freud's attitude towards Judaism to enumerate all conferences Freud gave in the framework of B'nai B'rith. Nevertheless the elucidation of Freud's activities in this lodge is very worthfull. But I think the paper, if it should be published, would have to be based on a more extended and profound basis. Also, in my view, the reflections of the members of B'nai B'rith on Jewish identity are not modern, they are more a testimony for the hope of the Jews of the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century to be fully accepted, when assimilating themselves to the citizens of the countries in which they lived, a hope which was cruelly destroyed by the years of the Holocaust.

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