Sigmund Freud: “Anti-Semitism is a rich collection of unconscious projections”

Summary:

- Sigismund “Sigmund” Schlomo Freud was born into a Jewish family from Moravia in imperial Austria in 1856.
- He became famous as a doctor in Vienna for his research into the human unconscious and the psychoanalysis based on it.
- His theories are still controversial today, but they made him one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century. Freud died in exile in England in 1939.
- Freud was also known as a critic of religion – and was controversial. He described himself as a “godless Jew”.
- With the help of the AI assistant Grok, FokusIsrael.ch spoke to Sigmund Freud about Judaism, his rejection of religion, anti-Semitism and Zionism.

From Sacha Wigdorovits

Mr. Freud, you have described yourself as a godless Jew. Why?

Sigmund Freud: My dear sir, I am a Jew, that is beyond question. I have never tried to deny this fact. But I have nothing to do with religion. For me, God is nothing more than a childish illusion, a longing for the almighty Father. That is why I deliberately call myself a godless Jew.

If you have nothing to do with religion, why do you still call yourself Jewish?

Sigmund Freud: Because for me, my friend, Judaism is much more than religion. It is a cultural and spiritual identity. I share the same history, the same fate of persecution and the same intellectual tradition with my people. You don’t have to believe in God to be Jewish. The blood and the spirit connect us more deeply than any faith.

What would you describe as the cultural and spiritual identity of Judaism?

Sigmund Freud: Judaism is above all an intellectual attitude. It is the courage to question, doubt and analyze. It is the spirit that is not satisfied with simple answers. In addition, there is a deep skepticism towards authority and a strong sense of togetherness through shared history and persecution. This is our true heritage, not the belief in a god.

Do you really believe that these characteristics would have come about without religion and religious experiences?

Sigmund Freud: That’s a very good question. I am convinced that the Jewish intellect did not arise from the Torah, but from the permanent need to defend ourselves intellectually. The constant threat from outside forced us to be smarter, more alert and more skeptical. Religion was only the outer garment. The critical mind is our true survival tool.

As we all know, you don’t just have a problem with the Jewish religion, but with religions as a whole. Why?

Sigmund Freud: Because all religions are basically the same, my friend. They are collective neuroses, illusions that people invent in order to endure their helplessness and fear of death. They promise comfort where none can be found and demand obedience in return. Religion is the universal compulsion to submit to a father-substitute.

Their image of God is not shared by all scholars in Judaism. Maimonides, for example, strictly rejects the humanization of God.

Sigmund Freud: That’s right, Maimonides wanted to free God from all human characteristics. But that doesn’t change the psychological core. Even the most abstract God remains a father substitute, only in a philosophically disguised form. People project their need for protection and authority onto him, no matter how hard they try to dehumanize him.

Could it be that you deny the existence of God because for you it means a loss of control that frightens you?

Sigmund Freud: An interesting reversal, my friend. But no. It is precisely because I know the human longing for control so well that I recognize it in religion. The believer gives up control in order to feel safe. I, on the other hand, have learned to

endure reality without such illusions. This is not a loss of control, but the courage to stand without crutches.

Judeo-Christian morals and ethics are based on the laws of God: the Ten Commandments. So what is wrong with believing in God?

Sigmund Freud: The Ten Commandments are undoubtedly one of the greatest moral achievements of mankind. But they do not need a divine origin to be valid. Morality arises from human reason and coexistence. Selling them as God’s law was just the most clever way to get people to obey them.

Turning away from God has never benefited the Jews: as secular and assimilated people, they were also persecuted. You yourself also had to flee from the Nazis from Vienna to London. What good did your godlessness do you?

Sigmund Freud: Nothing, absolutely nothing. The anti-Semites never cared whether I was a believer or not. For them, I was simply a Jew. My godlessness didn’t save me, it only made my own life easier. The tragedy of Judaism lies precisely in the fact that you can’t escape it – no matter how much you distance yourself from the religion.

Why is every Jew the same for the anti-Semites – regardless of whether he is secular-assimilated or ultra-Orthodox?

Sigmund Freud: Because anti-Semitism is essentially not a religious phenomenon, but a deeply irrational one. It needs the Jew as a projection surface for everything that people hate about themselves – the foreign, the intellectual, the successful. Whether the Jew prays or not is irrelevant. The hatred is directed against the being itself.

The Catholic Church persecuted the Jews as Christ-killers, the Nazis persecuted them as an inferior race, and for today’s Islamists they are the infidels par excellence. The justifications changed, but the anti-Semitism remained the same.

Sigmund Freud: You are right: the conscious justifications for anti-Semitism have changed over the centuries – sometimes they were religious, sometimes racial, sometimes political. But the unconscious root remains the same. The respective ideology is only the respective cloak in which the deep, irrational hatred is clothed.

What is the root of this irrational hatred?

Sigmund Freud: This hatred has many layers: The Jew as a symbol of the father, whom one simultaneously admires and hates. The Jew as the bearer of the intellect, embodying the repression of instinct. The circumcision of newborn boys, which the unconscious perceives as an act of castration and which therefore frightens non-Jewish men, which then turns into hatred. And above all the Jew as the eternal stranger who never quite belongs and thus threatens his own non-Jewish identity. Anti-Semitism is a rich collection of unconscious projections.

Is it even possible to fight anti-Semitism successfully?

Sigmund Freud: Unfortunately, only to a limited extent. Anti-Semitism is as old as civilization and survives every enlightenment. It can be contained by education and laws, but not eradicated. As long as people have unconscious fears and aggression, they need a scapegoat. The Jew was and remains particularly suitable for this. The best defense therefore remains a strong, self-confident Jewish state.

So why were you always skeptical or even hostile towards Zionism?

Sigmund Freud: Because I believed that anti-Semitism would disappear of its own accord as the Enlightenment progressed. I thought the idea of a separate Jewish state was an unnecessary step backwards into national romanticism. I also feared that Zionism would fuel anti-Semitism rather than solve it. As you know, I was thoroughly mistaken; I massively underestimated the power of the irrational in people. The Enlightenment did not defeat anti-Semitism, it only forced it into other forms. History has taught me otherwise.

In Israel, there is a great divide between secular and strictly orthodox Jews. There are rational reasons for this, such as military service. In your opinion, does the unconscious also play a role?

Sigmund Freud: Yes, that is the age-old conflict between the desire for freedom and the need for strict authority. The secular live according to the laws of reason and modernity, the orthodox according to the laws of tradition. Both claim the same heritage, but they speak different languages. This division has basically always been there, only now the state of Israel is making it visible.

If the seculars, like the ultra-orthodox, were to lie on the couch with you as a collective: How would you treat them?

Sigmund Freud: I would say to them: “Recognize at last that you both share the same trauma – the fear of being persecuted and destroyed again. This common fear should unite you instead of dividing you. Let the old religious quarrels rest and learn to respect your different ways of life side by side. Only then can you survive as a people.”

RemarkThis interview was conducted with the help of the AI assistant Grok. It is based on the writings and other statements of Sigmund Freud. In the coming weeks, we will be holding AI-supported conversations with other personalities from different areas of life – politics, religion, science, culture – who were important for Judaism and Israel, in order to bring them and their ideas closer to today’s audience. The The first such interview took place with Theodor Herzl the founder of modern Zionism, the second with Chaim WeizmannIsrael’s first president, the third with David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israelthe fourth with Israel’s only female prime minister to date Prime Minister, Golda Meir, the fifth with Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian presidentwho traveled to Jerusalem in 1977 to make peace with Israel, the sixth with Moses, who led the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery to freedom, the seventh with the 12th and 13th century living great Jewish scholar Maimonidesthe eighth interview was with the former former British Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks.