

Jews have always had a special fascination with Freud's theories—no one more so than my own mother

“The Jewish psychiatry of the communists is . . . a Godless criminal atheist doctrine of Frankenstein medicine that will condemn a man for having faith in God. How stupid and perverted are our medical people to base a medical system on a man named Sigmund Freud, who stated that man's natural instinct was to murder his father so as to have sex with his mother?”

The passage above comes from a white-supremacist website, perhaps one that twenty-two-year old Dylann Roof frequented in his previous life—that is, before he was tried, convicted, and condemned to death for massacring nine black parishioners at prayer in a South Carolina church in 2015. Roof had filed a pre-trial motion stating that he would not call on any mental health experts in court because he does not believe in psychology, which, he confided to his journal, “is a Jewish invention and does nothing but invent diseases and tell people they have problems when they don't.”

Because Roof's crimes were so horrific, his anti-Semitic theories around psychology aroused relatively little attention in the media. No doubt, most observers imagined this claim about Jews and psychology to be just another bit of hateful piece of nonsense to emerge from a clearly hate-addled mind. Yet in this one arcane area, Roof's paranoia is based on more than a grain of truth. While it is certainly untrue that psychiatry “does nothing but invent diseases,” calling it a “Jewish invention” isn't entirely indefensible. Of the thirteen members in Sigmund Freud's founding circle, only one was gentile. Their patients were virtually all Jewish as well.

There are plenty of theories for why this was so. Freud's Austria was quite anti-Semitic, and close association with him, whether as a colleague or a patient, would have been stigmatizing for non-Jews. But more pertinently: In my (Jewish) view, there can be no doubt that there was something familiar and accessible to Jews in the Talmudic nature of the psychoanalytic process. Instead of probing Torah narratives and commandments to know God's will, psychoanalysts probe patients' utterances to know their unconscious drives. I can see why the simple transfer of methodology from the interrogation of miracle-based texts to exegesis of exotic psychological tropes might appeal to the Jewish psyche, while being alarming to a grievance-collecting conspiracy theorist like Roof.

As I can attest from my own 1940s and '50s upbringing in Toronto, you didn't have to be in Freud's inner circle to be affected by the Jewish predilection for psychoanalysis.

To my mother, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts were god-like figures, all-knowing and pure of intention, their craft a unitary corrective to what ailed modern man.

Some kids' moms felt they missed their calling as a dancer or a writer. Mine, a high school graduate with native intelligence, but underdeveloped critical thinking skills harnessed to overdeveloped self-confidence, was an analyst manqué. I simply accepted that “what do you think you/she/he really meant by that?” was a normal response to even the most banal assertion at our dinner table. I assumed all families were like that, but they weren't. It really was a Jewish thing.

My mother had a theory about political leadership and how it could be improved. If candidates for office were pre-screened by psychiatrists to weed out those with neuroses, she believed, the world would never again suffer the ravages inflicted by a Hitler or a Stalin again. And if those deemed fit for office submitted to psychiatric therapy before governing, that swords would turn into ploughshares. I see her sitting in our den in Toronto, one slender leg folded gracefully over the other (the rest of her being pudgy, she was extremely vain about her legs), complacently exhaling a fragrant stream of smoke from her Rothman's cigarette as she intoned her signature proclamation, “Life can be beautiful!”

This was in the 1950s. I was an impressionable teenager, and I did not find her idea as ludicrous as I would in retrospect. Just as “red diaper” babies in the 1930s and ’40s were raised by their parents to believe the world was divided between evil capitalists and right-thinking Communists, I was for many years persuaded by my mother’s equally binary approach to life that history was a struggle between the psychologically crippled and the psychologically healthy (amongst whom she naturally counted herself).

To my mother, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts (there are, of course, important differences between their professions, but it was all the same to her) were god-like figures, all-knowing and pure of intention, their craft a unitary corrective to what ailed modern man. It never occurred to her that the power to give the thumbs up or down on a politician’s readiness for office, then based entirely in the personal opinion of someone whose judgments were rooted in hypotheses and theories, might lead to corruption. Her naïveté is astonishing in retrospect, but I suppose one could say the same about Marxist utopians.

To be fair to my mother, I think she had difficulty processing the fact—still pretty fresh then—that six million Jews had been murdered for no comprehensible reason. “Evil” was not a good enough explanation, for evil is not curable, and my mother was an inherently optimistic person. It had to have been some form of mental illness. Religion had obviously been no help, so it must be science alone that could make “never again” a reality.

Well, that is what she and many other people believed at the time. I did too, because the books by post-Freudian psychoanalytic writers she pressed on me—Karen Horney and her theory about the tyranny of life’s “shoulds” being the most vivid in memory—exuded scientist-like confidence.

Kernels of doubt occasionally lodged in my mind, though. One memorable incident that my mother witnessed and reported to me involved her friend’s husband, an almost parodically Jewish–German psychoanalyst. When his five-year old son told him, in mixed company, “I love you so much I could eat you up,” his father calmly and ponderously responded, “I know zat you fantasize about killing me, dear boy, but zis is nozzing to feel guilty about.”

Psychoanalysis is pretty well over today. It is crazily time- and money-consuming, and it rarely accomplishes anything for people suffering from true mental anguish. Coping strategies and medication have replaced extended, unstructured talking marathons, obsessions with toilet training trauma and alleged Oedipal fantasies. The focus is increasingly on short-term life crises or truly debilitating problems for which some form of chemical treatment is part of the solution.

But when I was a young adult, settling in for no-cutoff therapy with a “shrink” was commonplace, for Jews at any rate for what I was led to believe were serious, but what I would now call trivial, reasons: normal clashes with parents and siblings, sorrow over a teenage break-up, less than perfect social success. I spent a desultory few months in psychiatric therapy as a teenager because my mother thought it would be a salutary intervention, although I can’t now remember why.

The dreams I offered up for dissection weren’t even very interesting. I could see that in my phlegmatic doc’s yawn-stifling face. I sympathized, because in spite of my best efforts to present as a fascinating case, I was boring myself. It was embarrassing to reveal the intimate thoughts he clearly considered it his obligation to probe, and I think we were both relieved when my “therapy” sputtered to a halt. Perhaps he told my mother I was “cured.”

I am not surprised that I didn’t resist the process, though. In fact, I felt chuffed to have accomplished this rite of passage into an elite virtual club. Being neurotic, or even being thought to be neurotic, was a kind of social capital amongst Jews of my generation. At the University of Toronto, Jews studying the humanities attended University College (the other three colleges were church-affiliated). We would sit around the Junior Common Room (it was only ever called the JCR) in our black turtleneck sweaters, surveying the room with world-weary, kohl-lined eyes, drinking bad coffee, and turning the air blue with smoke, as we kvetched about how misunderstood we were by our parents, and how neurotic we had become as a result.

I was reminded of what a “thing” neurosis was for me when I read recently that writer/actor Lena Dunham felt ashamed

that she had never had an abortion. Her victim envy made me laugh, but it resonated. Neurosis was supposedly a psychological deficit, but amongst highly self-regarding middle-class Jews of a certain stripe—"snowflakes" *avant la lettre* came to be equated with superior intelligence and psychological complexity, just as social activists today, wracked by perceived omnipresent racial, gender and class microaggressions, feel a sense of special righteousness in calling them out. For a highly educated Jewish young woman in artsy circles to admit that she was psychologically normal and got along swell with her parents made her a bit pathetic, a bit of a simpleton.

We sophisticates identified with the Glass family in Jewish J. D. Salinger's novel, *Franny and Zooey* (published in 1961, my sophomore year). The precocious Glass children were highly neurotic, alienated (though outwardly conforming) and mentally anguished; but they were oh so attractive, so cultured, so brainy, sensitive and witty. Salinger seemed to be saying that neurosis is a small price to pay for brilliance and glamour. Another message, presumably unintended, as there is not a hint of moral judgment in Salinger's treatment of his precious characters, was that narcissism, blame-shifting and virtue signalling were normal traits in a fully self-aware individual in touch with his or her feelings.

*Franny and Zooey* appealed to the campus crowd. Alienated adolescent Holden Caulfield, a Glass-family predecessor in Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, had already captivated the general reading public in 1951. And then, in 1969, came Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, the literary high colonic that shocked America with its comedic, but mortifyingly comprehensive revelations of a nice Jewish boy's masturbatory history, as told to his German analyst, Spielvogel, who remains mute throughout the novel until the very last page. (For many Jewish men, that novel's most memorable line is "A Jewish man with parents alive is a fifteen-year-old boy." Ouch.) Jews were divided on *Portnoy's Complaint* between horror—what will the goyim think?—and tribal pride that one of our own had so galvanized the culture. It was the same w Mordecai Richler in Canada.

With their protagonists, both Salinger and Roth dwelled on that most Jewish of characteristics in highly self-conscious and articulate Jews when seized by a compelling idea: a striving to burn through the veils separating awareness from comprehension, comprehension from commitment, commitment from virtuosity in follow-through. Culturally Jewish, but spiritually deracinated, they plucked salvational promises from a zeitgeist in large part shaped by Freud, whose Ego, Superego, Libido, and Id had displaced the assumptions of moral agency traditionally attached to sexual and social reciprocity.

For the Glass children, who stood in for a significant number of what we non-alienated Jews came to call "BuJus"—Jews dissatisfied with Judaism's tribalism, legalism and tediously punctilious demands, who looked to Buddhism and other Eastern religions for universal spiritual nourishment—the vision was mystic, disembodied love for humanity. For Roth, it was orgasmic utopianism without (Jewish) guilt. The yin and the yang of psychoanalysis. Squish them together and you end up with neo-pagan Carl Jung, who was, by the way, the one non-Jewish member of Freud's inner circle I alluded to earlier (they broke over a doctrinal dispute).

Jung brought us the lofty concepts of personality "archetypes" and the hypothesis of the Collective Unconscious. But he also had an erotic relationship with a young patient and believed that "the prerequisite for a good marriage, it seems to me, is the licence to be unfaithful." (Was psychoanalysis in the end a Potemkin village to hide the sordid truth that guilt-free transgressive sex was all these guys ever really wanted? The-heart-wants-what-it-wants Woody Allen spent how many years in analysis?) Oh yeah, and it was only in 1950 that Jung modified the bylaw of his Analytical Psychology Club of Zurich restricting Jewish membership to 10 percent.

Looking back, I can see that blind faith in psychiatry as the Answer was a kind of mania in the 1950s and beyond for Jews who had lost touch with the faith of their fathers, but were too bourgeois and socially conformist to find appeal in far-left political radicalism. Smart, striving secular Jews, who couldn't for one reason or another complete the upstream leap to material good fortune, tended to gravitate to political ideology. And there were enough of them to make up a massively disproportionate share of the Communist movement in the West. So whacko white supremacists such as Roof aren't completely off base in their identification of Jews with Communism either. In both cases, the appeal was a universal belief system in which Jews might melt—unChosen, unChosen at last!—into the general polity, whether the defining authority was the universal Unconscious or an international classless society presided over by Big Brother. The

two faith systems also had in common the belief that human unhappiness was the consequence of non-rational laws and taboos. And God knows Judaism is more chockablock with those than any other religion I can think of.

Psychiatry may have begun as a Jewish invention, and Jews are doubtless still disproportionately represented in their ranks, but it's no more a Jewish profession today than accounting and lawyering and all medical disciplines are—that's to say disproportionately Jewish in membership, but to no discernibly Jewish purpose.

My mother was American, Detroit-born and bred, and was far more tolerant, even approving, of the bullish style in politics than most decorum-seeking Canadians. Lately, I find myself wondering what she would have made of America's 2016 presidential campaign. I note wryly to myself that her tidy theory would have been dangerously strained at the seams. Obama, for whom she would certainly have voted, is the very picture of psychological health and maturity, and Hillary, for all her ethical baggage and lack of charisma, publicly the same. How would my mother have felt about the egregiously uncontrollable Donald Trump, I wondered, a walking, talking, tweeting template for narcissism, impulsivity, ADHD, and disruptive mood dysregulation disorder (tantrums that persist beyond an appropriate age).

In my mother's projected scheme, Trump would have been declared unfit to run within five minutes, without professional demur or dissent. On the other hand, she was also a Zionist, and Trump seems committed to support for Israel. Obama's decision to let an anti-Israel resolution sail through the UN Security Council in his final days would have upset her. So this would have been a very confusing time for her.

When my mother thought the cure for anti-Semitism was psychological hygiene, her hopes were buoyed by the post-Holocaust orgy of self-recrimination that swept through Western nations. Her generation—and mine, too—really believed anti-Semitism was a dying animal. The re-establishment of sovereignty in Jews' indigenous homeland was a miracle to my parents' generation, and mostly to mine. She could not have foreseen, and would have been utterly confounded by, the next iteration of universal-panacea Jewish inventions bent on unchoosing the Jews: a social justice movement in which Israel would feature as a villain. Anti-Zionism's Western leadership is made up primarily of progressive academics, and of them a huge disproportion is Jewish. This would have been a source of turmoil and shame for her.

Perhaps, in light of this, she would have heard, as Freud did a century ago, the faint rumble of approaching tumbrils. Maybe she would have seen in Trump a latter-day version of the golem. In Jewish folklore, the golem was a legendary figure, a clumsy, outsize, lumbering, human-like creature, formed of mud and clay, who came to life to protect European Jews in parlous times. But the trouble with golems is that like Frankenstein's monster, they are unpredictable and potentially dangerous proxies, even to their wards. But when blood libels take hold of the popular imagination, a powerful creature of mud and clay ready to stand between Jews and the jackals is not to be despised.

The world was not a friendly place to my grandparents, which is why they came to Canada. Listening to her gut, and remembering her history, my mother probably would have set aside her fetish with triaging neurosis. She probably would have voted for the golem. And zat, dear Jewish lady, is nozzing to feel guilty about.