



Clio's Psyche

Understanding the "Why" of Culture,
Current Events, History, and Society

Rozentsvit on Antisemitism

The Psychoanalysis of Antisemitism

Palestinian Boys' Play

Hamas' Victimology Victory

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Breaking the Wheel of Anxiety

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Antisemitism is Oedipal

Adam J. Sacks—University of Hong Kong

Abstract: This essay uses tools of psychoanalysis to shed light on the Oedipal roots of antisemitism and the family-like entanglements between Judaism and Christianity. Repeated historical and psychological patterns reveal mimetic competition and an underlying sacrificial logic behind ancient animus. These suggestive analytic reflections serve to provide additional layers of psychohistorical engagement with ongoing issues of cultural resentment.

Keywords: antisemitism, blood-libel, Christianity, historical, Judaism, Oedipal, psychological, supercessionism

The profound psychological roots of antisemitism in the West lie in family, Oedipal-like relations between Judaism and Christianity. Antisemitism here, without the hyphen, is meant as a general catch-all for the historical animus toward Jews, rather than the specific racializing political movement of late 19th Century Europe from whence the term originated. A psychohistorical reading of theology and doctrine is essential to uncover its roots. For instance, when the Catholic Church sought to create an authentically post-antisemitic relationship with Judaism, the older faith was framed not in parental terms but in those fraternal, as an older sibling. This phrase was uttered by Pope John Paul II in 1986 on the occasion of the first visit of any pope to a synagogue. This move tacitly underlines that a parental framework was behind much of the grief and persecution.

Judaism has long denied a fraternal status as the “brother” role was so clearly claimed by the figure of Jesus. Jesus is recurrently more fraternal than paternal in his relations, especially in the Passion narrative (the story of Jesus’ final week). In brotherliness, he dwells in the middle of society, in and amongst the common,

even the marginal. His age and state of maturity mark him as brother rather than as father in the human life cycle. Cosmically, Jesus serves as a mediator, a meeting of the human halfway to the divine as divine brother-companion for all humankind. The Vatican's apologetic transfer of fraternal status onto Judaism is a way of revising the predecessor religion, rendering it more Jesus-like.

The conflict-ridden Gospels are very much a story of rebellion by the younger generation. The Band of Brothers Jesus movement cleared a new plateau of equality, one scarcely imaginable beforehand in either Roman or Judaic society. All conceivable stigmatized outsiders and untouchables are welcomed in—Samaritans, lepers, prostitutes, and slaves—demonstrating compassion to the harassed and the helpless, scandalizing the caste system of the Jerusalem Temple cult, birth-determined and with strict laws of purity governing interaction between the castes (Kohanim, Leviim, Israelites). Though the Hebrew Scriptures record several relapses to paganism, hardly had there been such a direct challenge to the caste system of the Temple from a rising generation.

The list of *Halakahic* provisions (the Judaic legal corpus) that Jesus self-consciously violates is impressive in its length: from work on the Sabbath to touching lepers, and to the laws of purity while eating. Jesus also repeatedly challenges the earthly dwelling place of the cosmic father, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Though not a member of the priestly caste, he dares teach in the courtyard and infamously runs amok amongst the money changers there to facilitate the sacrificial cult. The threat posed to parental authority is made abundantly and repeatedly clear: Jesus is ultimately a legitimizer of transgression and an architect of the reversal of the fundamental quality of superego demands. Ultimately, Christianity exchanges a material burden of discipline (kosher laws, Sabbath observance, circumcision, and intermarriage controls) for one more psychic and emotional, specifically the injunction to love, forgiveness, and kindness. The outer discipline of the Law of the Father, as handed down by the paternal-like Moses, is jettisoned almost in its entirety. Jesus is then marked for death, a judgment stained with cosmic, Oedipal intensity. Primal in human understanding is that first-born fruits are an unearned pure gift from the divine sphere to be willingly returned there. Jesus' story elevates this sacrificial logic onto the divine family. His death evokes a paramount existential dread: parental abandonment by the father.

Ritual sacrifice of the son harkens back to the very start of

the Abrahamic journey to faith. The paradigmatic test of this faith involves a readiness for child sacrifice. One of the most well-known stories in the Hebrew Scriptures is the *Akedah* or binding of the miracle child Isaac. This reveals violence at the heart of monotheist foundations, a binding in shared trauma. Abraham passed the test by proving he was willing to sacrifice his son, having him bound and ready for slaughter. The supernatural last-minute appearance of a ram caught in the bushes does not indict this resolve nor the logic of sacrifice itself. The predecessor religion of the Canaanites did indeed sacrifice children to their god Moloch, a shadow undeniably cast on the Bible story.

The specter of child murder reverses the natural order and threatens any promise of continuity. Repressed after Abraham in the Israelite story, it cast a shadow that loomed large as a possibility, as an account outstanding that would one day require posting. Later Bible stories consistently loop back to the reaffirmation of parental authority. The story of Moses and the giving of the Law ultimately boils down to a face-off between a primal cosmic father and an earthly ruler, Pharaoh, who erroneously claims an earthly god-like ultimate paternal authority.

Sacrificial Logic as Enmity Generator

Jesus' murder by the father, read as a sacrifice, forces traumatic witnessing, compounding the psychological violence inherent in the removal of a prior regime of authority. Jesus takes on this painfully immense burden to free future generations from intense paternal legal pressure. The "sins" he dies for are those defined by Mosaic Law and the inevitable inability of humanity to live up to its strenuous demands. This paternal authority is revealed to be not only onerous but also sadistic and murderous.

Jesus, innocent and all-loving, is like a human caught in the animal jungle. By the end of his life, he is beset by an atmosphere of unrelenting and generalized hostility from all quarters. Ultimately, his abandonment is total: He is betrayed, his disciples disperse at the time of his condemnation, and even his chosen successor, Peter, denies him thrice. The Band of Brothers is clearly overcome with the guilt of overthrowing the law of the father. Jesus' absorption of generalized and collectivized guilt is like a brother absorbing generational convulsion and the guilt of his fraternal comrade. His protracted death is a total "forsaking," a thorough ravaging of body and soul, a cosmic loneliness of complete abandonment by family and friends.

The Oedipal intensity of the birth of the Christian son religion out of the Jewish religion of the Father isn't just about child rebellion. The subtext is that parental wrath may suicidally devour all potential for life growth. The crucifixion is a psychohistorical return of the repressed primal practice of the sacrifice of the firstborn. In this instance, it also signals, via a founding murder-trauma, the start of a new and distinct civilizational project. Freud was so wedded to this phylogenetic postulate of primal, founding trauma that he claimed that the Israelites had, in fact, murdered Moses but then repressed the crime. Having escaped this burden of guilt, Jews self-immersed into a disproportional cultural degree of life-affirming *jouissance* (enjoyment), which in turn secured for them the enmity of generations. To paraphrase Adorno's summation of modern fascist antisemitism: The attainment of world happiness can only come about if that of the Jews' is eradicated. The successor to the religious Israelite project was a sharp about-face, one graphically centered around a traumatizing murder.

From Jesus' death onward, the two faiths would engage in a vexed *pas de deux*, constructing each other relationally in contrast. In late antiquity, the religion of the son, Christianity, became more embedded in Greek Philosophy and doctrines of human-divine hypostasis, whilst the religion of the father, Judaism, embraced increasing legalistic levels of ritual purity taken from the Zoroastrian/Persian world. (In the modern world, breakaway Protestantism would reclaim the mantle of paternal, Old Testament orientation, while in response, the Roman Church would move ever more toward maternity with newfound doctrines on Mary.) Just as Christianity codified the human-divine fusion in the councils of Nicea, Chalcedon, and Ephesus, rabbinic elites in Palestine and Babylon took the bold step of textually incarnating the Oral Law into the concrete form of the Talmud. These contrasting incarnations would further the dichotomy of tribalist versus universalist, legalist versus emotionalist, realist versus romantic, and love against ethics.

Mimetic Competition and Supercessionism

Council Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism were actually mutual responses to a shared predicament: the end of sacrifice, the destruction of the Jerusalem Holy Temple, and the dispersion of the Jews throughout the Roman world. They attempt a response to a profound conundrum: how to exist in a world where the principal form of communication and expiation between the divine and human realms has vanished. For the ancient Judeans, the Temple was

the one site on earth where human ontology could be transcended and the divine presence rested, a piece of heaven on earth. Jews believed literally that the Presence of the Lord dwelled in the Holy of Holies inside the Temple precincts. For the centuries between Isaac and Jesus, pure and innocent sacrifices were institutionalized as the primary ritual act of the Abrahamic faith. Several times daily, first at the Tabernacle in the desert and then at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, featuring five major categories of offerings, up to a million a day of a half-dozen kinds of animals and the non-living, e.g., grain and incense. Of the 613 Commandments recognized within Judaism, approximately 200 or 30% relate to the Temple sacrifices. The Temple is destroyed, and Jesus is sacrificed/ascends around the same time, so parent and child religion share the deprivation of the indwelling of the divine on the earthly plane.

Jesus is that last sacrifice, claimed to satisfy for all times: a cosmic lamb for all the sins of the world, a spiritual streamlining of salvific promise. Jesus' sacrifice displaces and sublimates psychologically those of the Temple. Christianity's approach to sin absolution is more maximalist and unconditional, like that of a forgiving child rather than that more stringent and paternally severe of Rabbinic Judaism.

Christian theology understands itself as the final resolution of the sacrificial logic at the heart of the Israelite religion, in the concept known as supercessionism. The glitch in this doctrinal matrix is that the parent religion neither vanishes nor engages with this Christian resolution, instead persisting in what could be seen as a parental pose of narcissistic neglect. Hebraic survival also appears as an artifact-like vestigial presence, even a ghost-like haunting. Like the echo of the voice of the "undead" parent that continues to ring in the inner ear, Judaism's very continuance could seem an indictment of the legitimacy and veracity of Christianity, a hindrance to the self-actualization of the child. Taken to an extreme, the undying, undermining parental shadow can appear as a demonic nemesis, a pull into pre-existence and non-existence. European folk traditions would easily assimilate Jews into the satanic, the archon of death, forever enemy of Jesus: by standing on the side of death, to them, Jews forfeit any claim to life.

Antisemitism cannot be disentangled from the continual and traumatic re-witnessing of an Oedipal murder. Even after painstaking reforms, most recent Passion Plays do fully dispense with multiple scenes that generalize antagonism to Jesus amorously with-

in Judaic society. As this Passion story forms the yearly climax to the sacred Christian calendar, such psychologically burdensome retelling accumulates the need for an expiation from the expiation, a release from the inescapably tragic loop of Jesus' substitutionary atonement. This classic explanation for antisemitism is further bolstered by the fact that the deepest canard of antisemitism is the blood libel, a blatant case of projection anxiety regarding the ritual murder of children.

On the deepest strata of mimetic competition between parent and child religions is an oft-overlooked metonymic ambiguity. The opposing corollary to the doctrine that Jesus usurps the role of the Temple of Jerusalem is that it is, in fact, the people of Israel who inherit the mantle of the body of Christ on Earth. The experience of total and utter forsakenness, repeated in time and regularly all along the political and geographic spectrum of humanity, is psychohistorically more the lot of the people of Israel than the people of Christ. Sacrificial torments regularly visit this body, and antisemitism consistently takes the form of a motor churning displaced and expiatory sacrificial violence. The tormented body of Christ in history may ultimately be mere metonymy, an adjunct for the thing *really* meant, namely the ongoing earthly torment of the body of Israel.

Adam J. Sacks, PhD, obtained his PhD and MA from the Department of History at Brown University, a Master's of Science (High Honors) from the City College of the City University of New York, and a Bachelor of Arts, Summa Cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa from Cornell University. He can be contacted at adam_sacks@alumni.brown.edu. □

Aggression and the Purpose of Antisemitism

Charlotte Schwartz—Psychoanalyst

Abstract: The author hopes to demonstrate how antisemitism has been utilized by various societies to discharge aggression in the form of hate to the "other," and thus protect their Indigenous populous from excessive harm. Jew as the recipients of the negative aspects of the aggressive drive spares the dominant group from the murderous rage and hatred that is an inherent aspect of this drive.

Keywords: aggression, antisemitism, drives, Freud, hatred, identification,