

Herzl on the Couch

Because, behind every ideology.... lies a psychology



***An analysis-driven look at Israel and Israelis
Six Interactive Lectures
With Rabbi Rich Kirschen***

Why Herzl on the Couch?

When discussing Israel, the political, the religious, or even the cultural often take precedence when trying to understand the complexity of the Jewish State. Yet, what is often overlooked are the psychological underpinnings of this old/new land and its challenges. By examining the shock of exile, the trauma of homelessness, and the chaos of return to the historic homeland, people gain an invaluable opportunity for **a deeper understanding of Israel and the Israeli psyche**. In essence, through a psychoanalytic lens people can begin to understand why Israelis behave the way they do.

Questions such as:

What was the psychological need behind the image of the macho Israeli Sabra?

What do we mean when we say, “Public Jewish Culture”?

Why was there a need to suppress, if not extinguish Yiddish?

Who are the West Bank Settlers and what motivates them?

And is Ultra-Orthodoxy a response to the Trauma of the Holocaust?

The questions are endless, but the answer of a psychoanalytic lens provides unique, comprehensive answers.

In the interest of understanding the Israeli mind (both conscious and unconscious), it is essential to have a firm grasp of **Zionism** and a familiarity with its architect, Theodor Herzl. However, if we want to get a deeper understanding of Zionism, we need to go further down the street and meet with Herzl’s Viennese neighbor, Sigmund Freud, the architect of **psychoanalysis**.

Both Herzl and Freud lived at a time of profound crisis and intense anti-Semitism, when Jews felt the imperative to solve the question of how they would **fit into the modern world**. While Herzl came up with the radical idea of Zionism—a solution that required a physical departure of the Jews from Europe and a return to their historic home in Israel—Freud developed the radical idea that the solution lay not in the physical but in the psychological.

Indeed, it is ironic that both the father of Zionism and the father of psychoanalysis not only lived in the same city, but *they lived on the same street*. Perhaps there really are no accidents. But the point is that there is tremendous value to understanding Israel today by going back to those two Jewish intellectual giants who both lived on Berggass Street in Vienna, a street in a European city at the crossroads of both East and West. Therefore, it is fair to say that **whenever we talk about Israel and Herzl, Freud cannot be far away**.

Sessions for Herzl on the Couch

1. Reaction Formation: King David, Groucho Marx and Moshe Dayan Walk into a Bar....

How do we understand the image of the Jewish male? And what defines Jewish masculinity? For part of Jewish history, Jewish males were defined by their warrior chiefs such as Joshua, King David, and Judah the Maccabee who lived in the land of Israel.

However, for many of us growing up in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century, our Jewish male role models were defined by Jewish comedians and writers such as Groucho Marx, Woody Allen, or Philip Roth. Conversely when the Jews came back to their land and established the State of Israel, Jewish masculinity was once again defined by military men such as Moshe Dayan, Ariel Sharon, and Yoni Netanyahu. How has this evolution affected our behavior? Has Israel gone too far in re-claiming Jewish machismo? Does Israel have a problem with toxic masculinity? Has newfound power clouded our ethical standards?

2. We Are All Individuals!!! Psychoanalytic Theory & Jewish Public Culture

In Sigmund Freud's *psychoanalytic theory of personality*, the unconscious mind is defined as a reservoir of feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories that are outside of conscious awareness. Freud believed that the unconscious continues to influence behavior even though people are unaware of these underlying influences. When conceptualizing the unconscious mind, it can be helpful to compare the mind to an iceberg. Everything above the water represents conscious awareness while everything below the water represents the unconscious. This model is not only true for how we conduct ourselves as individuals, but how we function in society. As much as we claim that we are unique individuals, we are in fact constantly yielding our autonomy to the power of the invisible public culture that surrounds us.

So, what does it mean when the public culture is Jewish, as it is in Israel, and therefore what does it mean when the public culture is "American?" This is an opportunity to examine how to navigate Jewish life in and outside of Israel, as well as ways to decode the conscious and unconscious messages of this complex matrix.

3. Reform Judaism Vs. Zionism: Neurotic Symptoms and Intrapsychic Conflict

Freudian and other psychodynamic theories view neurotic symptoms arising from inner conflict —i.e., the existence of conflicting motives, drives, impulses, and feelings held within various components of the mind will result in **symptoms**. The natural tendency for repressed drives or feelings, according to this theory, is to reach conscious awareness so that the individual can seek the gratification, fulfillment, or resolution of them. Such symptoms can form the basis of neurotic disorders.

Since 1789 and the French Revolution, Jews have been arguing about how to assimilate into the dominant society, while at the same time preserve their Jewish identity. As Jews began to assimilate into the larger culture questions arose about the best strategy for navigating this new situation, an argument that has now been with us for over two hundred years. The approach of adopting, adapting, and avoiding reflect the numerous Jewish reactions to modernity, which range from Reform Judaism to Orthodoxy to Marxism to Zionism. In many ways our different Jewish movements are like neurotic symptoms that arise in light of a very complicated psychological conflict.

4. Trauma, West Bank Settlers, and the Hastening of the Messiah

In 1973, the shock of the Yom Kippur War and the trauma of the possible annihilation of Israel shook the country to its core. Israelis reacted to this crisis with diametrically opposed approaches. While some Israelis felt that peace was more important than ever before, a small but dedicated group felt that the Yom Kippur War, with all the suffering that it brought, was necessary after the Six Day War, whose “divine” purpose was to bring the Jewish people together. The Yom Kippur War had exposed a deep crisis in *Herzlian* (i.e. secular) Zionism, which sought to solve the problem of the continued existence of the Jewish people on the one hand, and the problem of antisemitism on the other. But neither problem was solved through the establishment of the State of Israel, and now was the chance for the other Zionism—the Zionism of redemption or the hastening of the Messiah—to have its day. According to these religious Zionist settlers, the goal of this Zionism was not the normalization of the people of Israel in order to become a nation like all the nations, but to help it revert to being a holy people, the people of God, whose center is in Jerusalem with the Temple at its heart.

5. Ultra-Orthodox Behavior Patterns and Why They Are Crucial for Understanding Israel
Over the past seventy-five years since the destruction of European Jewry, Ultra-orthodox Jews—many who came to Israel as survivors or children of survivors—have morphed into a complicated and often misunderstood sector in Israeli society. First, they have been growing by leaps and bounds with a massive birthrate, averaging seven children per household and at times up to many more. Equally important, though, is that since the creation of the state these communities are increasingly characterized by an extreme approach to religious behavior that does not necessarily reflect who they were *before the war*. And as time has passed, this community displays a progressively hostile, if not violent, approach to anybody from the outside world. Does the Ultra-orthodox community see themselves as the answer to what happened in WWII? How does the role of the collective memory and trauma influence their behavior toward the Israeli government? As this group is Israel’s fastest growing population, understanding who are the Ultra-Orthodox and what explains their behavior is crucial for anyone wanting to understand Israel in 2020.

6. Narrative as Identity Crisis: The Complex Story of Jewish Exile and Return

The Jewish people and their homeland Israel, present a confusing narrative. Who are the Jews and where did they come from? Why did they “leave” their ancient homeland and why would they ever want to go back? What does the word *Jewish* mean? What is the origin of this word?

This session will take us back to the time of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel, and then will dive deep into the complex story of Jewish exile and return. How does a people maintain its identity outside of its homeland? How does this process of being constantly on the move affect the Jewish people’s understanding of itself? And finally, what did it mean to come “home” and find other people living in the house?

Biography

For many years Rabbi Rich Kirschen was the director of the NFTY in Israel and Keshet Birthright programs for the Union for Reform Judaism, bringing thousands of teens to Israel every year. Before making Aliyah, Rich served as the executive director of the Hillel Foundation at Brown University. Prior to that, he was the associate director at the University of Michigan Hillel. He was ordained as a rabbi by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. During his career Rich has had the privilege to lead numerous transformative learning initiatives. In that time, he has mentored hundreds of young people, both on the university campus and in Israel-immersive programs, while simultaneously counseling their parents to survive their child’s journey. He is currently a student at *Machon Shinui—The Israel Institute for Family Therapy*.