

The Uncanny in the Normalization of Antisemitism¹

By Rosine Perelberg

One feel inclined to doubt sometimes whether the dragons of primaeval days are really extinct.

[Freud, “Analysis Terminable and Interminable”, 1937, p. 229]

My language is German, my culture, my attainments are German. I considered myself German intellectually, until I noticed the growth of anti-Semitic prejudice in Germany and German Austria. Since that time, I prefer to call myself a Jew.

[Freud, in Gay, 2006, p. 448]

Le monde est plein de gens qui me haïssent à cause du mal qu'ils m'ont fait.

[Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 2012]

On 1 May 1946 there was an excited celebratory atmosphere in the streets of Paris, which were packed with people. It was the celebration of the end of the Second World War and the victory of the progressive political forces. The banner they carried displayed the words “Against Racism”. Jorge Josef, my father, was at the front of the demonstration and was one of those carrying the banner. He had survived after his years in the French Resistance, which he had joined when still as an adolescent. He had then taken the “nom de guerre” of “Jorge Du Lac,” his third name since he had escaped Poland in 1938 with just his nuclear family – because name-changing is part of the history of the Jewish migrations. Each day for the whole previous year, in 1945, my father had gone to the Hotel Lutetia, where the Gestapo had set up its headquarters during the occupation in France and where now the Allied Forces displayed the lists of those who had survived the extermination camps and were returning each day. The name of his father never appeared. Jorge was to find out later that his father

¹ Paper presented to the panel on Antisemitism at the IPA Congress in Lisbon, July 2025. This is a summary of a longer paper which has been submitted for publication.

had been murdered in Auschwitz, having been deported by the French police in Convoy No. 6, on 17 July 1942. Now, 1 May 1946 was a celebration of survival and also an homage to those 6 million who were no longer there. The assumption was that this was an opening to a new era of Justice, Freedom, and Equality. Each survivor, and especially Jewish survivors, pointed out the defeat of Nazism and its aim to completely destroy European Jewry.

The resurgence of antisemitism and its increase since 7 October 2023, especially in a Europe that had murdered its 6 million Jews, is therefore difficult to understand and digest: it raises despair and anguish. My father had died exactly one year before, in October 2022. How would he have experienced the times we have been living since?

Introduction

This paper aims to explore whether psychoanalysis has a contribution to offer to an understanding of the current explosion of antisemitism, which has an extremely long history and is still at play in the present. Antisemitism in the four continents intensified and became more visible immediately after the 7/10 attack in southern Israel.

It is not my argument that antisemitism explains the current conflict in the Middle East, although it is possible that it has had a role. Tragedy is the marker of the history of these two peoples, the Israelis and the Palestinians: a fratricidal conflict, in the words of Uri Avinery (1967). Harari (2024) has recently written about the real threat of the mutual annihilation that these two peoples face.

Harari stresses how both Palestinians and Israelis fear destruction and have annihilatory wishes towards each other. Palestinians have experienced repeated massacres and expulsions at the hands of Israelis, but also by Jordan, Lebanon, and Kuwait. Nakba marks their dispossession of lands and mass expulsion and displacement during the 1948 Israeli–Arab war. Israel has feared annihilation since its creation: on the day following its declaration of Independence in 1948, it was invaded by five countries – Egypt, Jordan Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq – which aimed to annihilate the new State. 800.000 Jewish people were expelled from Arab lands, where they had lived for centuries in what Gilbert has suggested was an “exchange of populations”².

² The United Nations estimated that over 725,000 Arabs fled from Palestine between April and December 1948. The Israelis estimated that between 550,000 and 800,000 Arabs fled. “Many

Throughout the ages, historians and specialists on antisemitism have been puzzled by the latter's persistence. It has been suggested that the "Jewish question has shaped the history of thought" (Nirenberg, 2013, p. 2). In 1993, Bela Grunberger suggested that the Jew had become

...a category which can quite naturally be applied to any enemy, real or imaginary ("Judaean-Bolshevik", "Zionist-Imperialist"); he is both the source of evil and a narcissistic wound, and he is a source of evil because he is a narcissistic wound.

[Grunberger, 1993, p. 240]

Antisemitism does not require the actual presence of Jews. Antisemitism, like other forms of prejudice, exists in the imagination of peoples – phantasies that are constructed about the other who is not I. There is a multiplicity of negatives attributed to the Jew, eternally a foreigner even in countries where Jews have lived for centuries. Yet the Jew is also the possessor of the symbolic cultural treasure: the law that prohibits murder, that inaugurates society and culture and is, as such, a source of envy and projections (Perelberg, 2022).

For Nirenberg, "Anti-Judaism should not be understood as some archaic or irrational closet in the vast edifices of Western thought. It was rather one of the basic tools with which that edifice was constructed" (Nirenberg, 2013, p. 6).

7/10 and the current antisemitism

The explosion of antisemitism in many parts of the world that followed the massacre on 7 October perpetrated by 3000 Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad against civilians in Israel has been shocking and frightening. The attack led to the torture and slaughter of entire communities in Israel (Booth, 2023), with dehumanising elements of exhibitionism (the videos produced by Hamas and posted on social media), perverse atrocities (the torture and rape of women and girls and the mutilation of their bodies in front of their families), and extreme sadism (e.g. slashing women's breasts while raping them or burning babies in front

Arabs were encouraged to leave by their own political elders...But over 160,000 Arabs either remained in Israel or returned to their homes in Israel during 1949" (Gilbert, 1974, p. 47). In 1945 there were more than 870,00 Jews living in Arab lands. More than 580,00 were expelled and went to Israel in what has been called an exchange of populations (Gilbert, 1974).

of their families). This was recorded in real time and shared on social media,³ the first time that this has ever happened in history (Herf, 2025).

This was the expression of the “*mal*” on display. Evil has no explanation, Green tells us in *On Private Madness* (1986), a reference to the response given to Primo Levi by his Nazi guard. French psychoanalytic authors have explored the idea of *Le Mal* as being outside the conflict between life and the death drives with reference to the Shoah in a process of desobjectualising that eliminates the existence of the other’s humanity.

The similarities between the descriptions of the 7/10 pogrom and the mass killings of Jews in Christian and Islamic societies in medieval times, the Khmelnytskyi massacres of the 1640s in Ukraine, the Russian pogroms between 1881 and 1920, and those by the Germans in 1942 in Bolechow make it more difficult to process psychically.⁴

³In the week of 25 March 2025 a cross-party commission of British Parliamentarians released the “7 October Parliamentary Commission Report,” also known as “The Roberts Report” – the most comprehensive investigation to date of Hamas’s October 7 terror attack on Israel (“UK Parliament’s Landmark Report Details October 7th Hamas Atrocities” – World Jewish Congress).

⁴Compare the following three events that took place in 1905, and 2023: Trotsky’s description of the Odessa pogrom in 1905: “trembling slave an hour ago, hounded by police and starvation, he now feels himself an unlimited despot. Everything is allowed to him, he is capable of anything, he is the master of property and honour, of life and death. If he wants to, he can throw an old woman out of a third-floor window together with a grand piano, he can smash a chair against a baby’s head, rape a little girl while the entire crowd looks on, hammer a nail into a living human body ... He exterminates whole families, he pours petrol over a house, transforms it into a mass of flames, and if anyone attempts to escape, he finishes him off with a cudgel. A savage horde comes tearing into an Armenian alms-house, knifing old people, sick people, women, children ... There exist no tortures, figments of a feverish brain maddened by alcohol and fury, at which he need ever stop. He is capable of anything, he dares everything. God save the Tsar!”

Southern Israel, 7 October 2023: “Hamas hunted Jews in southern Israel, burning them out their houses, shooting, killing, and abducting men, women and children. Hamas moved through towns and villages, slaughtering. At least 250 people were massacred at a music festival for peace, the executions carrying on for hours. One victim was paraded semi-naked in the back of a Hamas pick-up truck as militants sat on top of her and jeered.... Other murdered women were stripped naked and paraded through the streets with cheering men crowding round to spit on them. An elderly woman, a Holocaust survivor, was dragged away by a Hamas terrorist in her wheelchair. ... *Children were*

For such violence to be perpetrated, the humanity of the other must have ceased to exist. All the dimensions that signify personhood, maternal and paternal functions, and genealogy are abolished (Perelberg, 2020, 2022). Cruelty is unhinged. The confluence of the elements of jouissance, destruction, and pleasure in harrowing acts of unhinged cruelty make them difficult to be imagined. What are the mechanisms psychoanalysis has taught us for dealing with that which cannot be absorbed by the mind? Splitting? Projection? More recently Khan has elaborated on the concept of derealisation (Khan, 2024), which lead to processes of denial of what has already taken place.

Indeed, three days after the attack *and before Israel had invaded Gaza*, in many parts of the world celebrations of the massacre took place, with open antisemitic chants inciting further violent acts against Jews: “Kill the Jews! Gas the Jews!” could be heard in a demonstration in Sydney near the Opera House. Over the next four months, incitement of violence against Jews intensified, with physical assaults on Jews and Jewish synagogues, schools, community centres, cemeteries, museums, and Holocaust memorials. The subsequent tragic Israeli invasion of Gaza might have contributed to the increased manifestations of antisemitism worldwide, but it cannot be supposed to provide a sufficient explanation. With so many tragedies in the world, why the concentration on this specific conflict? In the social media, a radicalisation of antisemitism has taken place, in that no longer are Jews just attacked and insulted: there is also incitement to kill Jews (Jikeli, 2023).

The blurring of the line between the War in the Middle East, antizionism, and antisemitism is a phenomenon that deserves reflection. Many countries, including the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, witnessed an increase in violence against the Jews, with attacks in synagogues, schools, and on individuals in the street. Responsibility for the violence of the war in the Middle East has been attributed to Jews around the world.

Why was the murder of Jewish people celebrated and legitimised by and across so many people and countries immediately following the 7 October massacre? These celebrations indicate identification with the perpetrators and the lack of a sense of solidarity with the victims, with the latter being blamed as perpetrators in a process of projection, reversal, and denial. Throughout the history of antisemitism, there have been perennial occurrences of such processes of reversal and “blaming the victim”, creating a justification

kidnapped. Canadian peace activists were abducted. Entire families were taken.” (In Fathom, 8 October 2023).

for the persecution and attempts at extermination (Poliakov, 2003). Antisemitism changes its face according to the dominant ideology of the time, with each moment creating its Jew and investing it with its phantasmatic projections. It has taken economic, racial, and political forms across the centuries. One cannot but evoke the notion of compulsion to repeat in the various shapes that the persecution of the Jews has taken, which Freud linked to the demonic, on the side of the death drive.

While it is important to underline that a significant proportion of those marching in London in support of the Palestinians during the last 18 months have been genuinely concerned about the fate of the Palestinian people, the devastating suffering in the Gaza strip, and the wish for an end to the war, other messages have also been promulgated, such as “stop this Holocaust” (Rich, 2024). The Jews are accused of being the new Nazis, in a process of trivialisation and reversal of the Holocaust.

Yet, at the same time, the Holocaust as the signifier of the worst atrocities of the twentieth century has been used as a point of reference for suffering. Bruckner (2014) has suggested a competition for the Holocaust among different groups – as if to say, “Auschwitz is us” (p. 104), in a process of expropriation of the Jews’ history. How can one account for this mass movement?

The emphasis on “Gaza” and on an Israel–Gaza war also denies the historical context: of a conflict between Israel and the Arab countries that have, since its foundation, refused to recognise the State of Israel. It has been my hypothesis that not only did these Arab countries not want the presence of an Israeli state in the region, but they *did not accept the existence of a Palestinian democratic state in the region either*.⁵

“Gaza” has become what Yana Grinshpun calls “the desire for Gaza” and what psychoanalyst Michel Gad Wolkowicz suggests as a “fetishization of a fantasy of destruction”:

Indeed, a large number of speeches (banners, posters, slogans), support groups names, article titles, special issues of magazines, film production, political obsessions, diplomatic decisions, are all about “Gaza”. “Queers for Gaza”, “Gaza wall”, “all eyes on Gaza”, “everything you want to know about Gaza”, “Gaza my

⁵ I offered this hypothesis back in 1978 in a discussion at the University of London where my late husband, Sergio perelberg and I had been invited to have a debate about the Middle East conflict with the PLO representative of students in London. Some 200 students attended that debate.

love”, from Gaza to Ukraine, from Gaza to Auschwitz etc... Gaza has become a signifier of all the evils, and thus every other current tragedy and ongoing other wars have paled into significance. Is it because it involves Jews. (Author’s translation.)

[<https://search.app/znyG52we1atNfnXi9>]

In all this, the actual tragedy of Gaza is, paradoxically, reduced, as it becomes the representation of something else, of a universal cause.

Does psychoanalysis have conceptual tools that might help one to understand the explosion of antisemitism worldwide? How possible is it to be reflective if we are still in the moment of the trauma, with no possibility of a passage of time that would enable an *après-coup* to take place? How can one attempt to reflect at the very moment when people are being killed? Vamik Volkan (1988) has described the way traumatised societies regress and employ splitting and projection: all nuance is lost. Issues and people become reduced to good or bad, friend or foe. Extreme polarisation sets in, which is what we are going through today. Dialogue becomes almost impossible.

Freud and antisemitism

Psychoanalysis and antisemitism are indissolubly linked since the former’s foundation as well as in its historical development. Vienna, Berlin, and Budapest were the locus of the beginnings of the psychoanalytic movement, with all psychoanalysts being Jewish (until 1907, when Jung joined them); they lived in an environment where antisemitism prevailed. This was the case until the exodus that followed Hitler’s invasion and annexation of Austria and the institution of the Nuremberg laws. Yet the links between these two phenomena – psychoanalysis and antisemitism – and the specificity of antisemitism for psychoanalysis are not ordinarily reflected on in current discussions on prejudice and racism and are rarely studied in the curriculum of candidates. How can one understand this phenomenon? Might this be understood as the rejection of the Jewish origins of psychoanalysis?

Throughout his life, in his condition as a Jewish man, Freud was acutely aware of being in a minority in a process of geographical and social dislocation. This is clear in his autobiographical notes.

I was born on May 6th, 1856, at Freiberg in Moravia, a small town in what is now Czechoslovakia. My parents were Jews, and I have remained a Jew myself. I have

reason to believe that my father's family were settled for a long time on the Rhine (at Cologne), that, as a result of a persecution of the Jews during the fourteenth or fifteenth century, they fled eastwards, and that, in the course of the nineteenth century, they migrated back from Lithuania through Galicia into German Austria. When I was a child of four, I came to Vienna, and I went through the whole of my education there. [1925, p. 8]

Migration, displacement, and the experience of being in a minority are elements present in this narrative. The subsequent and continuous experience of discrimination, Freud explains, enabled him to cultivate his independence of thinking. In Vienna at the end of the nineteenth century, Freud, having come originally from Galicia, was in the position of the stranger, the foreigner, discriminated against; it is from this position that psychoanalysis was founded. It discovered the foreign within each of us, our own unconscious, the unfamiliar in the familiar.

Freud was acutely involved with Judaism, and one can apprehend his dialogue with the Jewish tradition in his writing. Throughout his work, there are over 400 references to his link to Judaism (Fuks, 2025). Freud was not a religious man, and he was able to benefit from the emancipation of the Jews in Europe, which led to the creation of so many Jewish intellectuals (Fuks, 2025).

From very early on in his writings, Freud became interested in the processes of identification, which is about the process of taking in the other, and which expresses the presence of the other inside oneself. In a letter to Fliess, Freud suggested that identification is a way of thinking about the object; it is in the relationship to the other that the individual is constituted. The opening of psychoanalysis towards the other is present in the method itself, in the emphasis on the transference, which points out to the relationship between patient and analyst.

One can identify contradictory explanations of antisemitism in Freud's writings: on the one hand, Freud suggested the narcissism of small differences. It is those who are closer to us whom we tend to transform into enemies – a process that enhances the cohesion of groups. I endow the other with unwanted characteristics. On the other hand, it is also the foreignness of the Jews that makes them a target for prejudice. These themes would be further explored in the text on "The Uncanny" (1919) and "Moses and Monotheism".

Freud felt that the dispersion of the Jews throughout Europe facilitated their being used as scapegoats.

In his letter to Romain Rolland, Freud identifies the role of the Jews as scapegoats:

I belong to a race that in the Middle Ages was considered responsible for all the epidemics, and that today is responsible for the disintegration of the Austrian Empire and the German defeat. [1923, p. 398]

In his letter to Stephan Zweig, having been at the receiving end of the experience of being discriminated against, Freud again wonders why the Jewish people have attracted so much hatred: “facing new persecutions I ask myself how the Jews became what they are and why do they attract this hatred” (1970 correspondence with Stephan Zweig, p. 104).

Foreignness and exile characterise Jews throughout their history.

Freud puts forward his theory of the hate for the other that is not oneself. This is to be understood together with his theory on the uncanny, the anxiety about the other who is, simultaneously, both familiar and different. Freud attempts to understand his experience of identification with Judaism and his ancestors in this way. Without following a religious path, he is in a constant dialogue with the sources of his identifications.

Derrida (2002) has shown the process of becoming in Freud’s Jewishness – a process that is there and never fully realised. In interviews he expressed modesty, or caution, about claiming full knowledge of what “being Jewish” means. Although for Jewish people themselves, the question of Jewish identification is in itself a source of questioning: it is from the Other that the insistence on the definition arises.

Fenichel suggests that antisemitism rises in periods of instability. Jews carry within themselves that which is “murderous, dirty and debauched”:

One can put it in one sentence: One’s own unconscious is also foreign. Foreignness is that which the Jews and one’s own instincts have in common. ...The Jew with his unintelligible language and ununderstandable God appears uncanny to the non-Jews, not only because they cannot understand him and therefore can imagine all sorts of sins in him, but still more so because they can understand. [1940, p. 28]

The multiple sources of antisemitism

In her 2006 IPA Report on Prejudice, Puget identifies three sources of antisemitism:

There are, however, signs of a creeping, partly unconscious antisemitism stemming from three main ideological and political sources: (a) part of the Catholic world and of the political forces inspired by it, which follows the traditional pattern of anti-Judaism and supports the Arab world for economic reasons; (b) part of the left, which disguises antisemitism as anti-Zionism (and anti-Americanism); and (c) the political forces inspired by Fascism, which are still present. [In IPA, 2021, p. 174]

One can, however, identify at least a fourth source for antisemitic hatred. In addition to “traditional” forms of antisemitism rooted in a fantasy of Judaism that regards the Jews as the killers of Christ, constitutive of the history of the West, I would highlight the antisemitism rooted in fundamentalist versions of Islam. Recent research has unearthed documents on the relationship in the 1930s and 1940s between Nazism and Arab countries in the Middle East (Küntzel, 2024). The archives also reveal the close collaboration between Joseph Goebbels and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Radical Islamic antisemitism

Radical Islamic antisemitism refers to a specific ideology with specific emphases, some of which were imported from Christian and Nazi antisemitism.

Sayyid Qub (1987) the most important ideologist of the Muslim Brotherhood, wrote an essay in the 1950s entitled “Our Struggle with the Jews”, in which he identifies Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Emile Durkheim as the most important opponents of Islam (p. 16). In his text the Koran is cited 33 times, along with six hadiths – instructions by the prophet to his companions. Article 7 cites a well-known hadith:

The prophet, Allah bless him and grant him salvation, has said: “The Day of Judgement will not come about until Muslims fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stone and trees. The stones and trees will say: O Muslims, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him.

There is a chilling link between this command and the 7/10 hunting of Israelis.

There are similarities between the anti-Jewish caricatures in the Middle East and those produced by the Nazis, and Arab editions of *Mein Kampf* and of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* continue to be published and disseminated in Arab countries. Küntzel (2024) suggests that under the influence of this penetration, the image of the Jew changed radically in the Arab world between the years 1937 and 1948.

Kuntzel (2024) suggests that this antisemitic genocidal propaganda was “one of the decisive factors that led to the Arab states going to war against Israel in May 1948. It was not post-war Zionism that led to antisemitism in the Middle East; rather, “it was the antisemitism that was previously fanned and inflamed that produced the subsequent conflict and its intensification” (Kuntzel, 2024, pp. 35–36).

Jews are also seen as the foreignness that challenges universalist causes. In the Arab world, it threatens its geographical and population continuity. Located in Africa and Asia, these Arab nations, combined, have a total area of over 5 million square miles, with 300 million inhabitants (1.5 billion people in the broader Islamic world). The presence of Israel interrupts this hegemony. In the words of Horvilleur (2019), “for the world to be at peace, it has to be rid of all that splits it apart, which is what Jews represent” (p. 119).

Further theoretical considerations

The Jew becomes the marker of an identity frontier, marking that which is not me. One can apprehend some of the overlaps in the characterisation of the Jews in these different forms of antisemitism, so that since 7/10, antisemitic caricatures drawn in Nazi Germany have been appearing in the Middle East as well as in marches in London and the United States.

Slavoj Žižek considers racism a “*universalized antisemitism* – that is, every ethnic ‘otherness’ is conceived of as an *unheimliches* double that threaten our enjoyment: in short, ‘normal,’ non-exceptional, non-antisemitic racism is no longer possible” (1994, p. 74). In this construction of the Jew as the Other, the uncanny is, by definition, being permanently constructed and deconstructed.

I have suggested that “perennial antisemitism continually expresses its hatred towards the paternal function and the symbolic (dead) father” and the law that prohibits murder and incest (Perelberg, 2015, 2016, 2020, 2022, 2025). Perhaps this formulation may also offer an understanding of the crucial relevance of the extreme violence perpetrated against women on October 7 – the gang rapes, and the mutilations followed by killings – they signify a return to a lawless world and a destruction of the paternal function. Everything is possible; there is no prohibition.

A particularly shocking aspect of the 7/10 massacre was a telephone call by a man to his mother, boasting that he had killed 10 Jews. The mother not only praised him but indicated a wish to join him to share the blood. Wolkowicz (2024) has suggested that the sharing of this massacre with his mother was an example of an “incestuous deadly jouissance” (“*jouissance incestueuse de mort*”) – in my own terminology, the abolition of the paternal function and of the third: the wish is to eliminate a whole people and substitute for it another – the Jews to be substituted by the Palestinians.

Evidence of this wish for substitution was that of the body of Shira Bibas, one of the hostages who was kidnapped with her two young children, for a Palestinian woman when Shira Bibas’s body was supposed to be returned to Israel. The justification given was that Shiras Bibas’s body had become impossible to be identified in the ruins of Gaza. Was this the expression of a wish for the whole Jewish people?

Freud (1919) suggested that the uncanniness occurs when the boundaries between imagination and reality are erased, and phantasies and projections attain the status of a belief. He further says: “It is always possible to unite a considerable number of people by love, provided there remain others upon whom one can vent one’s aggression.” (1930, p. 114).

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