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## Jewish annihilation anxiety : diasporic legacies of trauma

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Alexandra Samets  
Jewish Annihilation Anxiety:  
Diasporic Legacies of Trauma

## ABSTRACT

This paper presents and discusses the existence of Jewish annihilation anxiety, using both psychoanalytic theory and thinking from critical whiteness studies to do so. First drawing from early psychoanalytic thinking by both Sigmund Freud (1916, 1926, 1933) and Melanie Klein (1935) on the most basic dangers and fundamental anxieties, and then from later psychoanalytic thinking on the role of inherited trauma in creating enduring anxieties across generations, this paper presents the concept of annihilation anxiety as both an internally experienced psychic state and a trauma-induced one. Using the work of Eric Goldstein (2006) on the process and experience of Jewish cultural assimilation in the United States from the nineteenth century until the present, this paper argues that the experiences of both diasporic travel and cultural assimilation work in conjunction with a history of threat and a narrative of persecution to create a phenomenon described here as Jewish annihilation anxiety. This paper argues that Jewish annihilation anxiety, in which an ongoing threat of death and danger is incorporated into the most fundamental aspects of the self and identity, is a relevant concept when conceptualizing the experiences and pathologies of Jewish clients, patients, and clinicians. As such, understanding and further developing this phenomenon might lead to more effective therapeutic work with Jewish clients and patients, as well as more refined and integrated work on the behalf of Jewish clinicians. Relatedly, this paper argues that Jewish annihilation anxiety plays a role in American Jewish understandings of the state of Israel and as such, an understanding of Jewish annihilation

anxiety has potentially far-reaching implications for people doing politically-oriented social work both in the United States and in Israel and Palestine.

JEWISH ANNIHILATION ANXIETY: DIASPORIC LEGACIES OF TRAUMA

A project based upon an investigation, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2015

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## CHAPTER I

### **Introduction**

This is a project that contends with conflict, both psychic conflict and political conflict. It is a theoretical project that will draw heavily from psychoanalysis and therapeutic work on trauma. It is a historical project that takes up narratives of Jewish emigration from Europe and immigration to the United States. It is a project that draws from critical work on the meaning and deployment of Whiteness in the United States as well as on thinking about issues of cultural belonging and identity. It is an academic project and it is a personal project. It is a project that starts with a story.

### **Diasporic Origins: Untenable Home**

The Torah tells the story of the Egyptian Pharaoh who condemned the Jews to slavery. Angry and vindictive, terrified of an ethnic difference he perceived in the Jews, Pharaoh orders that all infant boys born to Jewish mothers should be killed. A Jewish woman named Yocheved gives birth to a baby boy; rather than let him be killed, the baby's older sister, Miriam, takes him to the river and sends him sailing in a basket to the bathing area of the Pharaoh's daughter, a barren woman who longs for a child. Pharaoh's daughter adopts this baby and names him Moses. As the Pharaoh's daughter carries the child home from bathing, Miriam appears on the path and mentions that she knows a woman who just lost her infant and is available to act as a wet nurse. Thus Moses is nursed by Yocheved as the Pharaoh's daughter raises him as her own.

Moses grows up as the vicious, prejudiced Pharaoh's grandchild. Despite this upbringing, Moses feels an indescribable affinity for the people his grandfather has enslaved and abuses. One

day, Moses comes across an Egyptian man beating his Jewish slave. Enraged, Moses strikes the Egyptian, killing him. As punishment Pharaoh banishes Moses, who spends his years in exile raising sheep in the desert.

One day, Moses and his sheep are walking through the desert and a bush bursts into flames in his path. This burning bush carries a message from God, who tells Moses that he is a Jew and that he must return to his home, confront his grandfather, and lead the Jews to freedom.

This story is told by Jews every year during the celebration of Passover. "Passover" refers to what happens next, after Moses returns and famously tells his grandfather, "Let my people go!" The enraged Pharaoh is matched in his rage by an equally vindictive, sadistic God who sets ten plagues upon the people of Egypt.

As Moses fights with his grandfather, the Egyptians are struck by plague after plague. The water of the Nile is turned to blood, killing all the fish and filling the land with an insufferable stench. In response, Pharaoh doubles the work he demands of his slaves. The Nile is filled to the brim with frogs who leap up onto the river banks and into the homes of the Egyptians. Terrified, Pharaoh agrees to let the Jews go free. But when the frogs die, Pharaoh rescinds this agreement. Next God and Moses together unleash swarms of lice onto the Egyptian people, followed by swarms of wild beasts. Again and again, Pharaoh agrees to let Moses's people go. But when each plague abates, the same God that extends his power to help Moses also reaches into Pharaoh's heart, turns it hard and entices Pharaoh to keep the Jews enslaved.

This is a story of a war waged with unbelievable weapons, wielded by a puppeteering God who plays both sides. As the wreckage of the plagues increases, Pharaoh longs to free his slaves but God prolongs the torture of this decision. Pharaoh cannot control himself or the havoc his decisions wreak. Pharaoh cannot stay his hand nor the hand of God. Something more



powerful than Pharaoh's wish to free his slaves is at the helm, driving the Egyptian people into destitution and destruction.

Pharaoh and Moses go round after round. The Egyptians suffer a hideous and painful skin disease. A thunderstorm of hail and fire rains upon the Egyptians. Pharaoh is moved and then moved back, God's pawn. God and Moses threaten Pharaoh with a swarm of locusts and God and Pharaoh offer a compromise—Jewish men will be allowed to leave but Jewish women and children must stay enslaved. God and Moses say no and the locusts descend. God and Moses cast “a darkness that can be felt” over Egypt and God and Pharaoh offer to let all Jewish people go but require they leave their livestock behind. God and Moses will take no compromises. The Jews mark their doors with the blood of sacrificial sheep so that the final plague will pass over the Jews and, as with each of the other plagues, punish only the Egyptians. The first born sons of Egyptian families are struck dead. At this point, the Egyptian people are devastated beyond measure—the war has killed the nation's sons, as wars do. Pharaoh relents. The Jews scramble to leave before God hardens Pharaoh's heart once again.

### **Diasporic Origins: Flight and Dislocation**

God does indeed harden Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh sends his troops after the Jews, whose flight to freedom pauses at the shore of the Red Sea. Without boats, there is no way for the Jews to complete their escape. In some tellings of this story, God tells Moses to raise his staff and command the waters to part. But in other tellings, Moses's raised staff fails to part the waters. The Jews, trapped between the sea and Pharaoh's troops, turn on Moses in rage—it was Moses, after all, who led them to this impasse, this interstice between the rock of water and the hard place of capture.

But one man, Nachson, does not turn on Moses. He does not surrender to Pharaoh's troops. Instead, he walks into the sea. He walks in until the water covers his knees, and the sea does not part. Nachson keeps walking. The water comes up to his stomach and still the sea does not part. Nachson keeps walking. The water comes up to his chest, then his shoulders. The water comes up to his chin. Perhaps Nachson sought to part the waters, perhaps he was following instructions from an unknowable God or perhaps he imagined suicide by drowning preferable to continued enslavement. Whatever his reason, Nachson keeps walking. The water covers his mouth. It covers his nose. It covers his eyes. Nachson's head disappears beneath the surface of the sea and only then does the water recede. The way is made. The Jews are free from Pharaoh's reign... free to wander the desert for forty years, looking for home.

### **The Narrow Place: Metaphor and Context**

This is a Talmudic and a biblical story, which means some people read this story as a literal description of long-ago events. Other people read this story as nonsense. Still others read this as moral instruction through narrative. I offer it here as metaphor and as context. As Jews celebrate Passover, some choose the word "Mitzrayim" instead of "Egypt." Though the story takes place in an historical Egypt, moving away from the word "Egypt" performs two functions. The first is that it discourages destructive, racist associations between the historical Egypt in the story and present Islamophobia. The second is that the word Mitzrayim—the Hebrew name for Egypt—translates as "narrow places." Thus the story of Passover is an invitation to move out of the narrow place of slavery and into the wide expanse of liberation. It is an invitation to move through the narrow places in ourselves, to examine our reliance on slavery, our complicity in the enslavement of ourselves and others. The story of Passover is a metaphor for the work of psychoanalysis, for the work of healing from trauma, for the collective endeavor of ending

racism. It is an invitation—a command, a requirement—to look into the darkest, most confusing and unknowable reaches of our psyches and free ourselves from emotional bondage.

The Exodus story offers additional context for this project. It is a story that lays the groundwork for Jewish diaspora, a concept that is integral to the issues explored in the coming chapters. It is also a story of the fear-based persecution of Jews, a story that leaves the pages of the Torah and follows Jews around the world for the centuries between the parting of the Red Sea and the present moment. It is also a story riddled with anxiety—anxiety that attends persecution, oppression, and the quest for freedom and self-knowledge.

**Internal Havoc: God and Pharaoh.** In my reading, God is the most confusing character in this story. God is vindictive and sadistic, irrational and hypocritical. God is punishing. God demands extreme sacrifice, is wrathful and vengeful, forgives no one. God seeks to teach Pharaoh a lesson, and God's pedagogy is torture. Because of his role in God's game of vengeance, Pharaoh is ultimately quite pathetic and worthy of sympathy. Who among us does not know the feeling of agonizing inner conflict as we again and again make the worst possible choice, somehow unable to do what we know is right? I imagine Pharaoh brought to his knees, stupid before God, wanting so much to free the Jews and spare his people but powerless as God takes hold of his weak and fearful heart.

Ultimately this project will explore a particular kind of anxiety, what is called “annihilation anxiety.” Annihilation anxiety is explained in detail in chapter one, but in its most basic sense it is exactly as it is named: a fear of impending death. However, in addition to describing the particular quality of anxiety associated with fear of death, it is also a term used to describe the particular quality of anxiety associated with fear of the loss of self. In the story of Exodus, Moses finds himself—both his true identity and a higher purpose—while Pharaoh loses

everything—water, people, crops, land, health, light. In my reading of the story, Pharaoh's punishment is, of course, the extreme suffering of his people and his land. But more so, it is the agony of God's occupation of his heart. God toys with Pharaoh's heart the way a predator will toy with its prey. Pharaoh's punishment is the internal havoc of being possessed by a God who will not let him make amends. It is the being possessed at all.

**Internal havoc: the wound of trauma.** In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1953) begins to explore the role of trauma in pathology. Caruth (1996) writes that

Freud wonders at the peculiar and sometimes uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them. In some cases, Freud points out, these repetitions are particularly striking because they seem not to be initiated by the individual's own acts but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside their wish or control. (p. 1-2)

Freud illustrates this with a literary example, a story told by Tasso in *Gerusalemme Liberata*. Caruth excerpts the following from Freud:

“Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armor of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again.” (Freud, 1953)

Caruth highlights what is perhaps most essential in this example. Freud used this example with the aim of illustrating what he terms the “repetition compulsion,” the way in which Tancred, like Pharaoh, is compelled to do the same thing over and over despite the conscious

wish to not do that thing at all. Caruth points to a central element in Freud's example, an element Freud does not notice, or at least does not explicate:

“[W]hat seems to me particularly striking in the example of Tasso is not just the unconscious act of the infliction of the injury and its inadvertent and unwished-for repetition, but the moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound. Tancred does not only repeat his act but, in repeating it, he for the first time hears a voice that cries out to him to see what he has done.” (Caruth, 1996, p. 2-3)

We can see this voice coming from the wound as the symptom, the signpost to the trauma that must be healed or risk continued repetition. The “wound that cries out” is the subject of the following chapters. Annihilation anxiety is a symptom, a crying wound—we see in Freud and Caruth that this makes it a message, a desperate cry full of meaning.

In Hebrew, the word for Passover is “Pesach”. As is the case with many translations, this one is rich with contention and discussion. While one can translate “Pesach” directly as “pass over” there are numerous other translations, including “to have compassion for” as well as “the voice that can speak”:

Peh sach - a mouth that can speak. Pharaoh had said, they are lost in the eretz, the earth, the desert; Midbar is closed off to them. Hassidic masters taught us that many of us have lost the power of the word - to give a word, keep a word, to form words that have inherent strength and can change things. Peh Sach means the mouth that can speak.

(Miller, 2015, p. 5)

The Exodus, the story of Passover, of Pesach, is itself a voice that speaks, a wound that cries out. It is the symptom that acts as signpost. It is a dynamic allegory for the legacy of diaspora and its myriad implications for therapy in the twenty-first century.

## **Jewish Annihilation Anxiety**

This paper seeks to introduce and examine the concept of “Jewish annihilation anxiety.” In Chapter Two, “An Anxiety by Any Other Name: the theoretical origins of annihilation anxiety” I will begin by exploring the early theoretical underpinnings of annihilation anxiety, using Freud’s work on anxiety and Klein’s work on annihilation anxiety more specifically. The focus of this chapter will be to explore the idea of annihilation anxiety as an internal phenomenon, something that works on an individual’s psyche independent of environmental forces. This chapter will also introduce some basic information about object relations, a concept that Klein and many other theorists use in discussions of individual development. Later in this paper, I will apply Klein’s thinking on object relations to issues of broader cultural imagination and collective relationship.

At this point in history, it is hard—perhaps impossible—to argue that external forces of environment are without impact on the individual psyche. For this reason, I will move from an examination of the early conceptualization of an internal experience of annihilation anxiety to a discussion of the role of trauma in annihilation anxiety. Because the particular dynamics of what I am calling Jewish annihilation anxiety invite me to do so, Chapter Three, “The Family Jewels: inheritance of trauma” will look specifically at the function of intergenerational trauma and inherited anxiety. The sources I examine in this chapter draw heavily from work on the Holocaust and/or work with the families of Holocaust survivors. It is important to note that much research on trauma more generally comes out of work following the particular psychological challenges stemming from the Holocaust.

Chapter Four, “Un-becoming: early Jewish assimilation in the United States” will turn to a brief examination of the history of Jewish immigration to the United States. In this chapter, I

am most concerned with issues of assimilation and Whiteness. In this effort, I use Goldstein's 2006 book *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* to apply an historical analysis of White supremacy in the United States to the process of American Jewish assimilation. While it is possible that the existence and experience of Jewish annihilation anxiety spans cultures, this paper is specifically concerned with White American Jewish identity and experience and as such, the historical context for American Jewish Whiteness and processes of assimilation is central.

The final chapter of this paper, "Jewish Annihilation Anxiety: an extended experience", will synthesize the two types of annihilation anxiety—internally generated and externally generated—in the context of Jewish experience to make an argument for the existence and relevance of Jewish annihilation anxiety. To do so, I will offer a general discussion of two examples from contemporary popular culture that each illustrate a specific aspect of the structure and function of Jewish annihilation anxiety. I will then go on to explain the ways in which I see this phenomenon as relevant to social work and psychotherapy in the United States, as well as the potential for broader political and clinical implications.

### **Other Considerations**

My biases regarding this project are plentiful. As a White American Jew, I have a deep, personal investment in the worth and importance of this endeavor. Because I have what I believe are personal experiences of Jewish annihilation anxiety, I am invested in Jewish annihilation anxiety as a concept to explain and through which to understand my own experience.

In thinking about the phenomenon of Jewish annihilation anxiety, I have drawn on an abundance of anecdotal evidence from the experiences of my Jewish family, peers, friends, and colleagues. The mere existence of this anecdotal evidence is itself biasing. In the same way that I

may seek to both understand and also explain my experience of annihilation anxiety, casual discussions with peers, friends, and colleagues about the subject of this paper have led me to feel both deeply moved by the depth and prevalence of this phenomenon and have induced in me a sense of responsibility to adequately prove the validity of the phenomenon.

Another bias I bring to this project is my critique of American White supremacy and my commitment to work toward dismantling systemic racism in the United States. I believe that a thorough, comprehensive examination of the way that Whiteness works in the United States is a vital element of dismantling systemic racism and White supremacy. I see this project as an element of a broader project of thinking critically about the way that Whiteness develops and functions in the United States. While many Jews in the United States are not White, many are. The fact that this project focuses specifically on the experience of White American Jews is not meant to diminish the existence of American Jews who do not identify as White. In addition to beginning to explore the concept of Jewish annihilation anxiety more broadly, this paper also seeks to engage with White Jewish identity in a critical and compassionate way. Some element of the decision to limit the focus of this paper to the experience of White American Jews can be attributed, of course, to the necessary limitations that must be applied to any project. However, the specific choice I have made here is undoubtedly related to my own identity as a White American Jew. My investment in exploring and understanding my own annihilation anxiety, my own Jewish identity, my own history of cultural assimilation, and my own racism and role in perpetuating a White supremacist culture is clearly evidenced in the subject of this paper. Nevertheless it is my hope that some elements of the work contained in these pages might apply to further research and theorizing on the role of annihilation anxiety in racial and cultural bias, war, other sorts of conflict, and oppression.



## **Implications & Limitations**

This paper aims to lay the beginnings of a comprehensive theoretical exploration of Jewish annihilation anxiety. It also aims to outline the relevance of the concept of Jewish annihilation anxiety to social work practice, psychotherapy practice, and social justice work more broadly. I believe that in these two tasks, this study shows strength and has value to the literature of social work. That said, this study's limitations are many. Most notably, as I have worked on this study I have had the edifying opportunity to gather extensive anecdotal data. However, such data has no place in a study of this kind. This study could have benefited greatly from a structured qualitative component. It is a potential strength of this study that it lays the groundwork for future qualitative data collection that could expand this study's theoretical argument.

Another limitation of this study similarly extends from one of its strengths. While this study looks at the earliest conceptualizations of annihilation anxiety and some of the most recent thinking about annihilation anxiety resulting from external traumatic experiences, it leaves out a substantial portion of the literature on annihilation anxiety and also on trauma. Notably, Winnicott's writing on trauma could have added significant dimension to the exploration of this paper.

Lastly, the reader will note that this study moves between clinical texts and evidence and historical and cultural phenomena. I feel that this movement is indicative of something vital about the nature of social work. Social workers, even when we are practicing psychotherapists, move between clinical, theoretical work and work that is grounded in a more general experience and analysis of injustice. There is nowhere we see this evidenced more than in social workers' investment in social justice. For this reason, I feel that the structure of this paper and the breadth

of its sources are illustrative of central tenants of social work practice. That said, there are ways in which this study and its conclusions could arguably be stronger and hold more clinical and academic weight if they focused entirely on clinical material.

The expected findings of this theoretical project are the demonstration of a particular experience of annihilation anxiety – an anxiety that functions primarily as a low-grade, constant hum of the threat – experienced by some Jewish people. The particular quality and nature of this phenomenon is likely to vary based on other identity categories. This study seeks to explore the presence and prevalence of Jewish annihilation anxiety in White American Jews, and to suggest that this phenomenon is relevant to the practice of social work in the following ways:

First, is relevant to the practice of social work simply because so many social workers and therapists are themselves White American Jews. Therefore, the experience of Jewish annihilation anxiety may have implications for the practice of social work and therapy when a clinician is experiencing Jewish annihilation anxiety. The inverse is also true. For clinicians who are not Jewish, there is the potential that they might work with clients or patients who experience Jewish annihilation anxiety. For these clinicians, understanding the existence and function of Jewish annihilation anxiety will augment the efficacy of their clinical practice.

A final implication of this study is for the relationship between American Jewish ideas of Israel and a commitment to social justice. As Israeli foreign, military, and occupation policy continues to subjugate the Palestinian people, an exploration of the way in which Israel exists in the imagination of American Jews and the purposes that imagination serves is absolutely imperative. It should be noted that it is also an enormous project in its own right, one that is only briefly undertaken in the final chapter of this paper.

## CHAPTER II

### **An Anxiety by Any Other Name: Theoretical Origins of Annihilation Anxiety**

In 1926, Freud first wrote of “traumatic anxiety,” a term he used to describe fears of extreme overwhelm and disintegration of the self. In the years intervening between Freud’s introduction of traumatic anxiety and the present, the concept has been named and named again. What this paper calls “annihilation anxiety,” Klein (1935) called “psychotic anxiety,” Anna Freud (1936) called “instinctual anxiety,” and Fairbairn (1940) termed “schizoid anxiety.” Winnicott (1960) wrote of “unthinkable anxiety,” Waelder (1960) wrote of “mega anxiety,” and Bion (1962) described the same phenomenon as “nameless dread.” For Guntrip (1969), nameless dread was “primary unrelatedness,” and for Mahler and Furer (1968) it was “organismic distress-panic.” Lichtenstein (1971) wrote of “fears of being negated in one’s existence,” and Kohut (1977) wrote of “disintegration anxiety.” This paper’s “annihilation anxiety” is not markedly different from Tustin’s (1981) “cataclysmic catastrophe,” Krystal’s (1988) “doomsday expectation,” or Shengold’s (1989) “too muchness.”

The term “annihilation anxiety” was coined by Little (1977), and is used here because I find that it encompasses the incredible breadth of affect indicated in its alternates. To my ear, the word “annihilation” is inextricably tied to the sort of deep and threatening panic this paper aims to explore. “Annihilation” is an urgent word, and in that way it calls forth Waelder’s “mega,” A. Freud’s “instinctual,” Guntrip’s “primary.” “Annihilation” evokes murder, and in this way,

“annihilation anxiety” wields the impact of Bion’s “dread,” Kohut’s “disintegration,” Tustin’s “cataclysmic” and “catastrophe.”

Annihilation anxiety is a psychoanalytic concept, but it is also self-evident. It is an apt name, requiring little in the way of simple explanation (though much in the way of deep exploration). Unlike “instinctual anxiety,” “psychotic anxiety,” or “schizoid anxiety,” “annihilation anxiety” does not demand translation. And one could argue that it is both more poetic and economical than “fears of being negated in one’s existence,” even if it does have the same meaning.

Each of these terms has been used to elaborate upon Freud’s description of extreme overwhelm. According to Hurvich (1989), “...Freud held that anxiety arises from two sources: as a direct result of being in a traumatic situation, and from the anticipation of being in a traumatic situation.” For Freud, a traumatic situation is one in which a person is faced with a degree of inner or outer stimulation that cannot be mastered—contained, transformed, or discharged—resulting in an experience of overwhelmed helplessness. This experience of overwhelmed helplessness is central to the experience of and the origin of annihilation anxiety. Hurvich (1999) defines annihilation anxiety as “a mental content reflecting concerns over survival, preservation of the self, and the capacity to function...” (p. 581) Notably, such concerns do not center solely around threat to life. Concerns over survival include fear of overwhelm and merger (killing part of oneself to become part of another), disintegration of the self (the feeling of “falling apart”), penetration (threat to the boundaries that preserve the self), and abandonment. As this paper later takes up more nuanced elements of this concept, these variations of “survival concerns” and their attendant meanings and origins will be explored.

## **Sigmund Freud: The Moment of Birth and the Birth of Anxiety**

Hurvich (1989) and others describe annihilation anxiety as “a universal potential anxiety,” though psychoanalytic literature predominately identifies annihilation anxiety as a component of psychotic personality structures. I am equal parts interested in annihilation anxiety’s role in psychotic processes and its universal potential. To understand each of these requires an extremely cursory discussion of Freud’s “traumatic moment.” If we return to Freud’s definition of a traumatic moment—one in which a person must contend with a level of stimulation that cannot be discharged or mastered, resulting in an experience of overwhelmed helplessness, it is perhaps not much of a stretch to see, as Freud did, that this describes not only all “traumatic moments” but also the moment of birth.

I understand that some readers may find it distasteful or otherwise difficult to consider the moment of birth as the original traumatic moment. However, this is one of the reasons I wish to push this consideration. It is central to understanding annihilation anxiety to see that Freud did not use the word “trauma” in today’s sometimes casual sense of “a really bad event.” Freud suggests that trauma be understood instead as “something really big” and (to a limited extent) “something entirely new.” For Freud, it is not so much the nature of the stimulation that causes a trauma as it is the quality and amount of stimulation and whether or not the individual is able to contend with the stimulation as it occurs. Trauma is not marked by badness but by the resulting experience of overwhelm and helplessness.

By this logic, then, there is perhaps nothing a human ever experiences that is as completely unprecedented as the experience of birth. Where some people may, due to any number of qualities of personality, events of upbringing, or resources of psyche, experience later

badness as somewhat easily integrated, processed, or discharged, the experience of birth is, for all humans, an initial trauma. Birth is an emergence into incredible stimulation, in all ways unlike the experience from which one emerges. This stimulation, entirely new, is nothing if not overwhelming. Sound, light, touch—each element of stimulation is new to the infant’s senses, which are themselves also new.

**Freud’s anxiety types and basic dangers.** In 1933, Freud revised his 1926 work on anxiety. Here, Freud writes of two sources of anxiety. The first source is the traumatic moment itself. This anxiety, “traumatic anxiety,” is the anxiety experienced in the moment of overwhelmed helplessness. The second anxiety Freud describes is anxiety that arises in anticipation of being in a traumatic situation. Freud called the second anxiety “signal anxiety.” When it functions as it should, it serves to alert the system to the potential danger, thus staving off the first anxiety by either avoiding the traumatic situation or somehow preparing for it.

Hurvich (1989) proposes that Freud’s traumatic anxiety can be called annihilation anxiety, in that traumatic anxiety is characterized by the experience of utter overwhelm and fear of threat to the self. Where Freud described four basic dangers, each corresponding to a basic fear, Hurvich contends that annihilation anxiety constitutes both the most basic fear and the core of each of the subsequent fears:

Based on the assumption that overwhelmed helplessness can at some point be anticipated, I believe it qualifies as a basic danger; indeed, as the first basic danger, of which the later dangers, beginning with the loss of the object, may be derivatives, and partial transformations. (p. 313)

The relationship of annihilation anxiety and fear of loss of the object is easily illustrated through the example of the infant. For the infant, who experiences extreme suffering in the face

of frequent overwhelming need which she cannot gratify, the object, or caregiver, is deeply associated with the experience of need gratification. The infant thus fears the loss of the object because without the object, the infant would be alone in her suffering and need and, ultimately, would be unable to survive. Thus annihilation anxiety is woven into the infant's fear of loss of the object.

Hurvich (1989) supports this understanding of the relationship between annihilation anxiety and the basic dangers by pointing to Anna Freud, who wrote "Loss of the care-taking object during the period of biological unity with the mother leads to fear of annihilation." (1965). He goes on to say that

Schur (1953) stated that in the first months of life, the infant responds to danger as though it were a traumatic situation (p. 69). Waelder (1967) pointed out that early on the danger of loss of love threatened both the existence of the ego and libidinal satisfaction, while later it threatens only the latter (p. 27). In the same way, early sensations of being overwhelmed can be equivalent to feelings of annihilation, although later a differentiation can usually be made between the two. (p. 316)

Fear of loss of the object and fear of loss of love are not difficult to conceptualize as intricately linked to annihilation anxiety. For the infant, each of these losses is potentially deadly. The third fear on Freud's list is fear of castration, corresponding to the danger of castration. This danger and fear are perhaps most useful when castration is understood as (at least mostly) metaphorical. For the purpose of this paper, the danger of castration is understood both as the danger of bodily harm and the danger of loss of an integral, potent part of the self. Both of these related dangers are, as in the case of the previous dangers, connected to annihilation anxiety—the fear of dissolution of the self, the fear of losing oneself inside another, the fear that closeness

with another body constitutes a threat to bodily integrity and thus survival are all examples of ways in which the connection between fear of castration and annihilation anxiety might reveal itself.

The final basic danger in Freud's danger series is the fear of the superego. In the simplest sense, we can understand this fear as correlating with the fear of aggressive action from either a caregiver or other object or from within. At its best, this fear serves to guide our moral functioning, but at its core, this fear constitutes an awareness of the threat of aggression. It does not take much to follow the logic of this fear to the annihilation anxiety that fuels it.

### **Clinical Relevance and Clinical Conceptualization: The Function of the Ego**

Understanding the clinical relevance of annihilation anxiety is integral to understanding the concept itself. Let us first consider Freud's assertion, to which Hurvich points us, that each basic fear corresponds to a stage of development, with the fear of loss of the object corresponding to infancy and Freud's oral stage, the fear of loss of love corresponding to toddlerhood and Freud's anal stage, and so on. (Freud 1933) As such, Freud proposes that the most basic anxiety corresponds with the earliest stage and each subsequent stage corresponds to a somewhat more developmentally complex type of anxiety:

If we dwell on these situations of danger for a moment, we can say that in fact a particular determinant of anxiety... is allotted to every age of dev. as being appropriate to it. The danger of psychical helplessness fits the stage of the ego's early immaturity; the danger of loss of an object (or loss of love) fits the lack of self-sufficiency in the first years of childhood; the danger of being castrated fits the phallic phase; and finally fear of the super-ego, which assumes a special position, fits the period of latency. (p. 88)



Hurvich's argument (1989) that annihilation anxiety comprises the most basic fear of all corresponds with what Freud's followers argued: that the state of infancy is a state of utter helplessness in which anxiety is total and all dangers are life threatening.

Hurvich explains that at this point in development, anxiety itself is felt as a life-threatening danger. We will return to this idea later in this essay, but for now it is sufficient to point out that this stage in anxiety's development is one that many if not most people experience in the course of their adult lives—the feeling of anxiety giving rise to further anxiety because the initial feeling of anxiety is itself so intolerable. Hurvich (1999) writes,

Anxiety, symptoms, regression, and disorganization may be experienced as psychic danger and can trigger annihilation anxieties as secondary phenomena. An anxiety reaction, including one that is somatized, is often experienced by the individual as evidence for the reality of the dangers... That is, the reaction to a currently experienced anxiety may contribute to the perpetuation of anxiety. The threat of reexperiencing helplessness may result in the patient's becoming afraid of being frightened... Under these conditions, the anxiety signal engenders ego disorganization and triggers panic, rather than leading to control of the potential danger. (p. 603)

### **Ego Function and Dysfunction**

Understanding the consequences of this experience and of other experiences of annihilation anxiety requires that we first understand the function of the ego. Only then can we comprehend the terrifying reality of the disorganized ego and the fundamental agonies inherent in annihilation anxiety. Though the list of ego functions has been revised throughout the history of psychoanalytic thought, contemporary thinkers consider the following essential ego functions:

1. Reality testing

2. Judgment
3. Sense of reality of the world and of the self
4. Regulation and control of drives, affects, and impulses
5. Object relations
6. Thought processes
7. Adaptive regression in the service of the ego
8. Defensive functioning
9. Stimulus barrier
10. Autonomous functioning
11. Mastery-competence
12. Synthetic-integrative functioning (Goldstein, 1995, p. 54)

While a detailed explanation of each of these functions is not necessary for this paper, it is vital that the reader understand that these ego functions form a composite picture of either ego strength or ego weakness. When each of these functions is working adequately, this is reflected in an individual's clear sense of self and others, sense of shared reality, ability to manage and process anxiety, ability to make decisions and stay out of danger, ability to think clearly and articulate one's thoughts, master skills, and control their impulses, among other things. When the ego functions are compromised or otherwise not fully intact, an individual's functioning is likely to be impaired in one or more of these categories. This leads us, of course, to the question of what might interfere with the ego's functioning and cause such a compromise.

In Freud's early work on anxiety (1926), he:

proposed that defenses arise to mediate between the pressures of the instincts and those of the internalized values of the superego. When conflict develops between id and

superego, anxiety emerges and acts as a signal to the ego to institute some type of action to eliminate the anxiety. Defenses are part of the ego's repertoire of mechanisms for protecting the individual from such anxiety by keeping intolerable or unacceptable impulses or threats from conscious awareness. (Goldstein, 1995, p. 72)

This summary of Freud's description of the function of ego defense serves to illustrate a central tenant of Freud's thinking on anxiety: whereas later work by Freud and others would take up the question of anxiety engendered by outside sources, such as traumatic experiences and external threats, much of Freud's work, especially his early work, focuses on internal sources of anxiety. Goldstein (1995) goes on to offer an example:

... A sexual urge in a woman might stimulate anxiety if it conflicts with an unconscious prohibition against the expression of such an impulse that stems from the woman's earlier sexualized relationship with her father. Such an individual may develop the defense of reaction formation when she experiences sexual feelings toward other men. Instead of becoming consciously aware of her sexual feelings, she may convert them (unconsciously) into feelings of revulsion. In this way she not only protects herself from anxiety but also keeps the childhood conflict buried. (p. 72)

The entire range of specific defenses at the disposal of the ego is beyond the scope of this paper. But in brief, the example above illustrates the defense of "reaction formation," in which we see that an unconscious process takes place to keep both the original conflict and source of anxiety as well as the feeling of anxiety at bay. Because anxiety is both an unpleasant and an ego-compromising experience, to the extent to which defenses are effective at minimizing anxiety without otherwise limiting a person's ability to function they are considered to be useful and generative. However, Goldstein (1995) writes that "... depending on the intensity of the

conflict, the nature of the current stimuli evoking it, or the fragility or pervasiveness of the defense itself, such mechanisms may prove to be ineffective or maladaptive.” (p. 73) In these ineffective or maladaptive forms, defenses may inhibit the person’s ability to be satisfied; simply not work or not work well enough “so that the person becomes overwhelmed, symptomatic, or disorganized”; or they may “distort reality to such an extent that overall ego function is impaired.” (Goldstein, 1995, p. 73)

Like anxiety,

Characteristic defenses are thought to originate in specific developmental phases...

While individuals may employ defenses arising from both early and later developmental phases, should the earlier, lower-level, or immature defenses predominate, the personality of the individual will appear more infantile. (Goldstein, 1995, p. 74)

This means that as an individual develops and becomes in every way more complex, the defenses they cultivate become similarly more mature. That said, all individuals will rely on the more immature defenses in certain situations, including situations for which those “lower level” defenses are best suited as well as in situations of extreme duress when the ego may be in a somewhat regressed state and unable to employ its mature defenses.

Under acute or unremitting stress, illness, or fatigue the ego’s defenses, along with the other ego functions, may become impaired. This alteration often is reflected in the defense’s failing, that is, it is not able to protect the individual from intense anxiety. Or, on the contrary, the defense rigidifies, that is, it becomes more extreme. When there is massive defensive failure the person becomes flooded with anxiety. This can result in a

severe and rapid deterioration of ego functioning, and in some cases the personality becomes fragmented and chaotic, just as in psychotic episodes. (Goldstein, 1995, p. 75)

### **Melanie Klein: The Emotional Life of the Infant**

The concept of annihilation anxiety as I am using it in this paper was largely developed by Melanie Klein. Klein, using Freud's work, began to consider the emotional life of the infant through her work with small children. Based on this clinical experience, she proposed that the ego is intact at birth, though it is weak and easily fragmented. Hanna Segal (1973) writes, "In Melanie Klein's view, sufficient ego exists at birth to experience anxiety, use defence [sic] mechanisms and form primitive object-relations in phantasy and reality." (p. 24) Whereas Freud postulated that the ego and superego developed later in childhood—and thus the early experiences of infantile overwhelm were, for Freud, biological rather than psychological—Klein observed that elements of both the ego and the superego are present in early infancy and thus have an immediate role in the dynamics of overwhelm and anxiety.

While Klein's considerable contributions to the study of "primitive" anxieties—that is, anxieties common to the earliest stages of human development—are paramount to this paper, Klein's work is central here for another reason as well. Though Klein's work was based on and in some respects followed closely to Freud's work, one of her most significant contributions to psychoanalytic theory was in the way she deepened and expanded upon the idea of object relations. Freud described that infants were motivated by libidinal energies—what he called drives. In much of his work, Freud focuses on the ways in which drives are motivating in and of themselves. Klein expands this notion to consider that drives do not operate unto themselves, but rather that every drive has an aim—an object. For both Freud and Klein, the word "object" denotes a person, most commonly one of an infant's primary caregivers. Based on the idea that

infants are not motivated by sourceless, aimless energy but rather toward expressing need and generating attention from caregivers—even before they understand those caregivers as people—Klein discovered that the infant’s internal world is comprised of a virtual map of such objects. As objects in the real world meet or fail to meet an infant’s needs, an internal version of those objects is cultivated that will determine the infant’s psychic and interpersonal development.

Early in her work, Klein’s theory was known as “object relations theory,” but as other theorists joined in the development of this work and Klein’s particular theories deviated from these simultaneous developments in some central ways, Klein’s theory came to be known as Kleinian theory. (Segal, 1979) Later in this paper we will turn to some of the other relevant dynamics in object relations theory, but for now we will remain with Klein and her work on anxiety.

**The Function of the ego, the id, and the superego.** To do this, however, we must briefly return to Freud, whose structural theory of the mind is central to Klein’s understanding of anxiety. Freud’s structural theory of the mind can be most simply understood as his theory concerning the id, the ego, the superego, and the relations between each of these structures. Freud’s id describes a source of purely pleasure-seeking energy and is the part of the mind that develops earliest in infancy. The id is modified and controlled by the ego, which is next to develop. The ego takes into account not only the pursuit of pleasure but also the pressures and demands of reality. The superego, for Freud, develops last, as part of the resolution of the Oedipus complex, and concerns morality and judgement. The ego functions to negotiate between the id and the superego and reality, and does so in large part through the use of defenses.

Though Klein used this structure of the mind in her theoretical and clinical work, her practice with very young children led her to modify Freud's timeline of ego development. Segal (1979), in one of her several comprehensive works on Melanie Klein, writes:

According to Freud, the superego is formed on the dissolution of the Oedipus complex. Before that the child fears the authority of the real parents. The introjection of the parents' prohibitions and the formation of an internal authority—the superego—heralds the approach of latency. The young child's superego was supposed to be in-existent or weak... Melanie Klein, on the contrary, was led to believe by her observation of children in analysis that the young child has phantasies of terrifying, punishing internal parents, constituting, in fact, a particularly savage superego with which the child's ego cannot cope. (p. 38)

This new understanding of “a particularly savage” early superego was central to Klein's idea of early anxiety. This terrifying, harsh superego is, for Klein, a primary source of anxiety. And where a more developed ego would have the capacity to withstand and modify this harsh superego, the early ego is not strong enough to cope with attacks from the superego and so is excessively vulnerable to overwhelm. Segal (1973) writes:

To assume that the ego has, from the start, the capacity to experience anxiety, use defense mechanisms and form object-relations is not to imply that the ego at birth resembles in any marked degree the ego of a well-integrated infant of six months, let alone that of a child or a fully developed adult. (p. 24)

**Internal distress and the function of fantasy.** It is important to notice that, while there are both subtle and more obvious differences in how Freud and Klein conceptualize the internal experience of early infancy, for both theorists, the experience of overwhelming anxiety is an

internal one. That is to say that the infantile experience of anxiety that exceeds the ego's ability to defend is related to internal distress rather than external stressors. Segal (1979) writes that for Klein, the internalized parents who comprise the superego bear no relation whatsoever to the real parents. Where an infant's real parents may in no way be terrifying, may be nothing other than tender and nurturing, an infant is just as likely to have an internal superego experience of vicious, attacking parents.

Fundamental to both object relations theory generally and to Klein's work on anxiety specifically is a complex dynamic of internal, fantasized attacks. This is important both in terms of how we conceptualize the object relationships that form an infant's map for further development and in terms of the broader implications of this paper. According to Klein, in early infancy the infant experiences the caregiver as a collection of "part-objects." Though this term can apply to a variety of body parts, it is perhaps most easily understood through Klein's description of the young infant's experience of the mother's breast. Rather than conceiving of the mother as a whole person, for the first three months of life, the infant experiences the mother as a "good breast"—that is, the breast that responds to the infant's need for nourishment—and a "bad breast"—that is, the breast that withholds nourishment and thus is experienced as offering instead frustration and pain. The bad breast is not understood as withholding but rather as attacking. The pain the infant feels in hunger is, according to Klein, experienced as an attack by the withholding breast. Moreover, during this early time, the infant does not attach these part-objects to one another or to the caregiver but rather experiences them as under his or her omnipotent control. It is the infant's hunger and fantasy of being fed that manifests the good breast and it is the infant's frustration and hatred of the bad breast that incites the bad breast to attack.



Klein's work on early fantasy was expanded by her colleague Susan Isaacs. On Isaacs' contribution, Segal (1979) writes:

Susan Isaacs brings this idea up to date by drawing attention to the fact that destructive impulses also express themselves in phantasies, giving rise to anxiety and dread of persecution. In the omnipotent mind of the infant the desire to eat becomes an omnipotent phantasy of having incorporated an ideal nourishing breast. The desire to destroy becomes a phantasy of a destroyed and persecuting breast. (p. 26)

Note that a central part of this dynamic is that “the desire to destroy becomes a phantasy of a destroyed and persecuting breast” and that this fantasy gives “rise to anxiety and dread of persecution.” For Klein and Isaacs, persecutory anxiety is present, and experienced as such, in the first three months of life. Not only this, but it is an active part of the early object relationships that will form the map for the infant's psychic development. Segal (1973) describes that “... deprivation becomes not merely a lack of gratification, but a threat of annihilation by persecutors.” (p. 26)

Klein eventually described this early orientation to part-objects as “the paranoid-schizoid” position. After the first two or three months of life, the infant begins to integrate its part-objects, realizing that the good and bad breast are part of the same entity and, simultaneously, that neither is controlled by him or her. Segal (1973) writes:

In [Klein's] 1935 paper she states that in the second quarter of the first year, with his growing integration, the child begins to perceive his mother as a whole person. She describes this change as the beginning of the depressive position. She explains that she uses the term ‘position’ rather than ‘phase’ or ‘stage’ because this change signifies that the child begins to experience his object relationship from a different position, a

different point of view. When the mother can be seen as a whole object, the infant can love her as a whole person and identify with her in a different way. It is to this whole, loved mother that the child turns to relieve his persecutory fears; he wants to introject her so that she may protect him from inner and outer persecution. This whole, loved mother is, however, herself felt to be an object exposed to constant danger. If she is felt as protecting the infant from the persecutors, but the same token she is exposed to their attack. But that is not all. The mother is now felt to be a whole object not only in contrast to the part objects of the previous state but also in the sense of not being split into a persecutory and an ideal object; she is felt to be the source both of the infant's gratifications and of his frustrations and pain." (p. 78)

There are many things to note about this passage, one of which is Segal's attention to Klein's use of "position" rather than "phase" or "stage." In Freud's work, and in much of the psychoanalytical theory that continued from his work, humans evolve through phases or stages of development. For Freud, these phases or stages unfold teleologically, and pathology occurs when one either becomes fixated at a stage—that is, when some aspect of the stage is not adequately completed or fulfilled—or when one later regresses to a previous stage—that is, when under duress one returns to an earlier stage of development. Klein's "positions" introduced a new orientation to the process of psychic development. In the first position, the paranoid-schizoid position, the subject is experienced as possessing omnipotent power over its part-objects. Segal writes that "it is a phase of part-object relationships, and it is dominated by persecutory anxiety and schizoid mechanisms." (Segal, 1973, p. 115) In the second position, the depressive position, the subject experiences its objects as whole, separate from the subject and as worthy of concern. Though the positions develop one and then the other, they do not indicate, for Klein, a

teleological development so much as a change in the subject's point of view, as Segal describes above. Similarly to Freud's concept of regression, a subject who has moved to the depressive position may (actually, will) return to the paranoid-schizoid position when under duress. Also relevant here is that both childhood and adult pathologies containing psychoses are rooted in the paranoid-schizoid position while pathologies centered on depression are rooted in the depressive position. Some pathologies move between the two positions to a greater or lesser extreme.

**Basic Kleinian concepts: Projection, introjection, and projective identification.** It is not possible to fully understand how Klein's "positions" operate without at least a functional understanding of several other pivotal Kleinian concepts. These concepts are not only necessary to an understanding of Klein's description of early infancy and childhood but also to this paper's larger aims and will be taken up again in subsequent chapters. The first of these concepts is that of "projection."

Drawing again on Segal's (1979) iteration of Klein's work, we can conceptualize projection thus: In order to create an ideal object, the infant projects onto an object (or part-object) the positive qualities he or she experiences him- or herself as containing. It is by this mechanism that the part-object of the good breast becomes good—the infant's experience of the breast coming to nurture him or her is at first that of omnipotently manifesting the nourishing breast. This capacity to make nourishment appear—experienced by the infant as his or her own capacity—is then projected onto the breast so that the good quality of nourishing is now contained by the breast. By this same process, the infant projects his or her negative qualities, thus creating the bad breast. The breast that does not arrive to nourish, as mentioned above, is not experienced as neglectful but rather as perpetrating the pain and frustration the infant feels. The infant experiences this pain with fantasies of retaliating against the hurtful breast and therefore

the pain the breast inflicts is experienced, by the infant, as a retaliation by the breast against the infant. The infant defends against his or her aggressive attacks against the breast (either in fantasy or in reality through biting) by projecting the aggressive impulses onto the breast and experiencing the bad breast as aggressive.

The function of projection is closely related to the function of “introjection,” a process by which the infant incorporates the qualities of the object into him- or herself. Segal (1979) writes that “The paranoid-schizoid position is a developmental step. The infant overcomes his fear of disintegration by the introjection of and identification with the ideal breast.” (p. 122) As the infant introjects the ideal breast, he or she begins to develop the increased ego capacity by which he or she is then able to defend against the persecutory anxieties which have dominated his or her experience thus far. Though pathological when used later in life, splitting between part-objects such that one part-object contains good and another contains bad is, Segal (1979) writes, “a first step in the capacity to differentiate,” (p. 122) and thus is a pivotal developmental step. This developmental step is continued through “projective identification,” another process which is often seen later in pathology. Segal (1979) writes that “projective identification [is] the first step in relating to the external world.” (p. 122)

**The death instinct.** To adequately grasp the function of projective identification in infantile development and in its relationship to anxiety, we must first explore Freud and Klein’s belief in the death instinct. Hinshelwood (1991) writes that Freud proposed a “dichotomy... between inherently opposed instincts. The libido, now including the ego-instincts (for survival and life) is opposed by a silent, hidden *death instinct* which demands dissolution and the opposite of life.” (p. 266) While Freud’s introduction of the death instinct was not well-met by the psychoanalytic community at large, Klein found that the concept was useful in explaining

heretofore undeveloped aspects of her conceptualization of early infant life. Hinshelwood continues to say that Klein evolved Freud's concept of the death instinct to say that "it is not so silent." (Hinshelwood, 1991, p. 266) Hinshelwood (1991) writes that the death instinct "has profound clinical manifestations that are very visible—they are the harsh superego itself. The superego was, then, the manifestation at birth of the death instinct operating a destructiveness towards the individual..." (p. 266)

For Freud, the death instinct was an internal and inherent pull to return to inanimate life, working against the libidinal pull toward energy and aliveness. For Klein, the death instinct explained the excessively harsh superego she saw again and again in young children, regardless of the nature of their reality-based relationships with their caregivers. Segal (1973) describes Klein's adaptation of the death instinct thus:

The immature ego of the infant is exposed from birth to the anxiety stirred up by the inborn polarity of instincts—the immediate conflict between the life instinct and the death instinct. It is also immediately exposed to the impact of external reality, both anxiety-producing, like the trauma of birth, and life-giving, like the warmth, love and feeding received from its mother. (p. 25)

By projecting the death instinct outward, the infant transforms it into a fear of persecution. Importantly, in this process Klein often found that splitting of the ego and projection would combine to create a sense of any persecutors rather than just one. As we have seen, an infant in the paranoid-schizoid position is largely contending with this type of anxiety. Segal (1973) writes,

The leading anxiety in the paranoid-schizoid position is that the persecutory object or objects will get inside the ego and overwhelm and annihilate both the ideal object and

the self... Against the overwhelming anxiety of annihilation, the ego evolves a series of mechanisms of defence [sic], a defensive use of introjection and projection probably being the first. (p. 26)

We can now return to exploring the concept of projective identification, which, according to Klein, evolves out of the initial projection of the death instinct. “In projective identification parts of the self and internal objects are split off and projected into the external object, which then becomes possessed by, controlled and identified with the projected parts.” (Segal, 1973, p. 27) Again, though projective identification can be profoundly disruptive if it is used excessively in the defensive structure of an adult, it is, for Klein, a vital part of infantile development. It is in the early use of projective identification that the capacity for empathy—for imagining someone else’s internal experience—is formed. Furthermore, Segal (1973) points out “that in the most normal individual there will be some situation which will stir up the earliest anxieties and bring into operation the earliest mechanisms of defence.” (p. 35)

What is most vital to understand here is the dynamic relationship between the feeling of persecution and the feeling of aggression; the drive toward death and the fear of being killed. For Klein, this played a central role in the development of object-relationships. It is also a theoretical dynamic we will revisit later in this paper.

### **Evidence of Ego Function in a Time of Terror**

We’ve seen, now, that the work Freud and Klein did on anxiety in general and annihilation anxiety in particular focused almost exclusively on the internal experience of persecution. This early work on anxiety laid some of the groundwork for later work on trauma and experiences of annihilation anxiety resulting from traumatic experience. In the next chapter, we turn our attention to annihilation anxiety resulting from traumatic external threat. However,

before we do so, a note on the positionality of the theorists who conceptualized annihilation anxiety as an internal experience of persecution, almost entirely disregarding the role of the external environment.

A cursory history lesson alerts us to the fact that the dates of publication of Freud's works cited in this chapter—1926 and 1933—were not neutral moments in the history of the Jews in Europe. Freud, a Jewish man living and working in Europe during Hitler's rise to power, seems to have gone to great lengths to exclude his lived experience of threat from his theoretical conceptualizations of anxiety. Kuriloff (2014) writes: "In many, many ways, the catastrophe of the Shoah simply fails, at least initially, to appear in the written record of psychoanalysis. It is not as if it didn't happen; it is rather as though the topic is being reserved for another occasion--far from the analytic process of theory of the day." (p. xiii) Kuriloff goes on to note the simultaneity of Hitler's control and Freud's theoretical traction, pointing out that many psychoanalysts, including Freud, were forced into exile:

The fact that refugee analysts did not discuss the influence of catastrophe on their work deserves study... What are we to make of the relative inattention to the collision between world-shattering events and a theory and praxis that remains entwined with psychoanalysis today? Could this silence represent a psychological response to trauma? Today's popular notion of dissociation could be employed to explain how the cohort's overwhelming experiences were jettisoned as too threatening to equilibrium. (p. 1)

In this way, the history of psychoanalytic theory itself serves as case material for the present study. As Kuriloff explains, the omission of the Holocaust from psychoanalytic literature is as multifaceted and complex as any trauma-induced phenomenon and as such cannot be considered as simple pathology in its own right. Nevertheless, Kuriloff (2014) writes:

Psychoanalytic theory in fact posits that one's early life, including infantile fantasy, has a sizable effect on both the quality and the degree of one's response to later trauma. Still, the overall neglect of Holocaust trauma in patients' material... is something else again. One might consider that such neglect of an experience that helped define a century, let alone the lives of so many of the leading theoreticians and clinicians in the field, represents a repetition of the unattended-to trauma, this time in a large-scale psychic exile. (p. 14)

As the next chapter will show, contemporary psychoanalytic work more readily engages with the existence and function of external events--including the trauma of the Holocaust, or in Kuriloff's Hebrew usage, the Shoah. Freud's and Klein's work on anxiety and on understanding the internal world of the infant are undoubtedly present in the psychoanalytic theories on trauma that followed from them. As we have seen in this chapter and will explore in more depth in the next, Freud himself thought intricately about the roles, mechanisms, and implications of trauma. And yet, as Kuriloff has shown us, the specific trauma of the Holocaust was almost entirely pushed to the periphery of the majority of psychoanalytic work done by those analysts most directly affected by the Nazi regime. Perhaps this is, as Kuriloff seems to suggest, evidence of ego strength that modifies not only the volume of internal threat, but also the volume of external threat that is quite literally pounding on one's door.



## CHAPTER III

### **The Family Jewels: Anxiety as an Inherited Symbol of Trauma**

While there are certain elements of the Kleinian and Freudian conceptualizations of annihilation anxiety that may resonate with the reader's own experiences of anxiety and/or anxieties the reader may have witnessed in others, if we leave the conceptualization of annihilation anxiety at the internal infantile/immature experiences, we miss a central aspect of how annihilation anxiety likely works. While Klein and Freud are correct, I think, in seeing the infant's experience as one riddled with life-threatening situations that understandably give rise to a sense of impending death and related anxieties, a full exploration of the ways in which adults experience annihilation anxiety is incomplete without looking at situations in which, as an adult, one's life is truly threatened and the resulting experience of residual annihilation anxiety that may follow.

Substantial literature exists on this subject, much of it in the form of research on trauma and the impact of trauma on psychic function. For the purposes of this project, I am particularly interested in the function of "inherited trauma", that is, trauma that is somehow passed from generation to generation without being fully resolved—in fact, this trauma is arguably passed between generations precisely because it was not fully resolved by the person or people who initially experienced it. This particular form of trauma is of interest to this study because of the role I imagine "inheritance" plays in families affected by diasporic migration. While certain elements of cultural and familial experience might be lost from conscious articulation, research

on intergenerational transmission of trauma suggests that a wide breadth of experience may be passed between generations without ever being articulated. In the introduction to his 2012 collection *Lost in Transmission: Studies of trauma across generations*, Fromm writes,

...[W]hat human beings cannot contain of their experience--what has been traumatically overwhelming, unbearable, unthinkable--falls out of social discourse, but very often on to and into the next generation as an affective sensitivity or a chaotic urgency. The word 'symptom' comes from the Greek and means 'to fall together', and the fallout of trauma from one generation to the next is one aspect of our study. But the Greek root of the word 'symbol' means 'to throw together' and carries a more active connotation. As Freud suggested, what appears at first to be a person's symptom might turn out to be a symbol; in the context of this book, a symbol of an unconscious mission assigned by the preceding generation. The transmission of trauma can be the transmission of a task: for example, the task of repairing a parent or avenging a humiliation. (p. xvi)

### **The Indefinite Defined: Traumatic Situations and Annihilation Anxiety**

In the same way that the experience of birth is utterly overwhelming and, according to Freud, is an experience that floods the limited processing capacities of the infant, any experience in which there is a true or perceived threat to life might have the same effect on a person of any age. It follows that the experience of annihilation anxiety might be initiated by any overwhelming, traumatic experience; for people whose defensive structures are predisposed—due to particularities in childhood development or to something else—to crumbling when the person perceives threat, annihilation anxiety might be induced more easily in the face of stress.

Trauma can be defined and discussed in myriad ways. Loewenberg (2012) writes, “Trauma is derived from the Greek term *traumatikos* for wound, meaning that external violence

has caused an injury; this usage is still current in medicine and surgery.” (p. 55) Early in his writing, Freud (1916) expanded the definition of trauma to include psychic and emotional injury. (Loewenberg, 2012; Caruth, 1996) Loewenberg continues:

Psychologically, trauma means a violent shock, a wound to the person’s self-concept and stability, a sudden loss of control over external and internal reality, with consequences that affect the whole organism. We now recognize a spectrum of trauma and traumatic experiences. Trauma may be acute or cumulative. Freud defined ‘trauma’ as ‘an experience which within a short period of time presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way’ (Freud, 1916-1917). The external stimulus is too powerful to be mediated by the normal adaptive coping mechanisms; the person is overwhelmed and helpless. The self disappears and psychic survival is threatened. The affects and the ability to symbolize feeling states are damaged. Responses range from apathy, paralysis, dissociation, splitting, and withdrawal, to panic, terror, annihilation anxiety, fragmentation, and disorganized behavior. (p. 55-56)

For the purposes of this project, I join Loewenberg in defining trauma as an event or a series of events that overwhelms an individual’s psychic system, creating a situation in which the conscious and unconscious processes by which we make sense of the world are shut down to such an extent that the event or series of events cannot be processed through language and integrated into identity. Fromm (2012) describes “... the way in which trauma destroys the capacity to cognize, symbolize, and remember, creating a ‘hole’ in the psyche, which is responded to by others, particularly in the next generation.” (p. 4)

**The role of identity.** As we look at the potential impact trauma can have on the defensive structures of individuals who survive traumatic experiences and on their offspring, we must also think about the function of identity in creating a sense of self in relationship to others:

Erikson (1959) argues that the key problem of identity is the capacity of the ego to sustain sameness and continuity in the face of changing fate... Family stories help us with our sense of identity and give us a narrative to hold on to, add to, and pass on to the next generation. We know our family history and can tell the story of how we came to be. Family characteristics of the past and present become familiar to us. We become connected to the way past generations have acted.

History, culture and religion form a large part of an identity to which one feels related. (Muller-Paisner, 2012, p. 22)

We see here that explicit narratives of family identity and experience might work alongside implicit, inherited, pre-consciously transmitted information about the world and the individual's place in it.

### **Sharing the Unspoken: the Transmission of Trauma as Anxiety**

It may not surprise the reader that the literature I examined focuses in large part on intergenerational trauma stemming from the Holocaust—it is, of course, highly relevant to the subject of this paper. As this chapter will go on to discuss, a central experience of childhood for many Jewish children in the United States (and likely elsewhere) is the explicit passing on/passing down of a traumatic narrative. This narrative may, for some, become an organizing principle of individual, familial, and cultural identity, thus opening the way for questions as to how it is that that narrative remains so powerful.

Fromm (2012) uses the work of Erik Erikson to explain some of the ways in which trauma and anxiety may be shared between generations:

Erik Erikson... wrote about ‘the subtler methods by which children are induced to accept... prototypes of good and evil’; (p.27); the way that ‘minute displays of emotion’, including ‘minute socioeconomic and cultural panics’, transmit to the human child the outlines of what really counts’ (p. 28). ‘Every neurosis,’ he says, is ‘somatic tension, isolated anxiety, and *shared* panic, all at once’ (p. 28). (p. xvii)

Based on this description of “subtler methods” through which trauma may be shared between generations, we can see how even without explicit stories of traumatic experiences and memories, a child might inherit—“be induced to accept”—information about dangerous situations, people, stories, feelings. Fromm (2012) goes on to write that:

The task of transmission might sometimes have to do with one generation’s cultivating a sensitivity in the next, so that it can warn about, or perhaps even take on the responsibility for, the ways in which the present is shaping itself into a nightmare from the past. (p. xvii)

In his introduction to a series of studies on intergenerationally transmitted Holocaust trauma, Fromm points to

Powerful themes of joining with the damaged other, healing them, or assuaging the guilt for not doing so, and for surviving when they have not, come through clearly, as does the profound confusion between past and present, and inner and outer, with which such people struggle when they face present-day trauma. (p. 3)

I would like to draw the reader’s attention to “profound confusion between past and present, and inner and outer...” for the ways in which it echoes Klein’s description of the paranoid-schizoid

position, a condition in which annihilation anxiety predominates. In this chapter, we will see Klein's annihilation anxiety in vivo, as in Fromm's description above.

Kogan's 2012 study on the so-called "second generation" (that is, the offspring of Holocaust survivors) focuses largely on themes of confusion: "The psychoanalytic literature on the offspring of Holocaust survivors states that the Holocaust is transmitted to them through early, unconscious identifications which carry in their wake the parents' perception of an everlasting, life-threatening inner and outer reality." (p. 5) It is important, here, to see the ways in which "the parents' perception of an everlasting, life-threatening inner and outer reality" is based in a very real experience of prolonged threat and suffering. To my mind, it makes sense that this experience would likely not be sufficiently resolved and integrated such that it would have no impact on the offspring of the people who experienced this terror. One might suspect that these "early, unconscious identifications," which are likely at least partially occurring while the infant is still in the paranoid-schizoid position, might somehow disrupt or hinder the infant's process in moving from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position. The reader will remember from the previous chapter on this subject that even once the depressive position is achieved, an individual will move between the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions throughout their lives, occupying the paranoid-schizoid position during times of extreme stress. Perhaps a traumatized parent may spend more time in the paranoid-schizoid position, and this, too, might have an impact on a child's achievement of the depressive position. Kogan (2012) goes on to say:

These children, whose minds have been impregnated with mental representations of the atrocities of the Holocaust deposited by their parents, carry within themselves powerful

feelings of loss and humiliation, guilt and aggression. They often feel compelled to enact the parents' suppressed traumas, thereby echoing their parents' inner world. (p. 6)

According to Kogan, this process occurs through something she terms "primitive identification", which she defines thus:

'Primitive identification' refers to the child's unconscious introjection and assimilation of the damaged parent's self-images through interactions with that parent. This process is an attempt to heal the parent and help him recover. This identification leads to a loss of the child's separate sense of self and to an inability to differentiate between the self and the damaged parent. (Kogan, 2012, p. 6)

**The trauma of the invasive other.** The reader may recall that one of the ways in which annihilation anxiety may be instigated is when the self is overwhelmed—not only by an event or situation, but by an invasive other. Therefore the "loss of the child's separate sense of self" and "inability to differentiate between the self and the damaged parent," falls within the realm of stimulation that can result in annihilation anxiety. The loss of self to invasion by another can be as threatening to the self as potential death. It follows from Kogan's description of the function of "primitive identification" that a child raised by a parent with a predominance of damaged self-images might be more frequently induced to engage in primitive identification and, in turn, be damaged both by the parent's damage the infant internalizes as well as by the process of primitive identification itself.

A related concept Kogan employs is that of "deposited representation," which Kogan defines thus: "Deposited representation' is a concept that emphasizes the role of the parent, who unconsciously, and sometimes even consciously, forces aspects of himself on to the child." (2012, p. 7) While this is a particularly potent concept in looking at the inheritance of Holocaust

trauma, it is equally applicable to other experiences, both traumatic and quotidian. In thinking about the way in which a diasporic people, such as American Jews, might be impacted by the experience of cultural assimilation across generations, the processes of both “primitive identification” and “deposited representation” are central. The feeling of being, so to speak, a stranger in a strange land, the pressure to adapt and hide and the tension between that pressure and the pressure to preserve a sense of cultural, familial, and perhaps religious identity are a potentially potent constellation of psychic experiences to be shared between generations via Kogan’s suggested processes.

**Clinical implications.** Kogan’s (2012) study focuses on two cases, both adult children of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. In her discussion of these cases, she emphasizes the role of the parents’ experience of a terrifying external reality in creating a particular defensive structure in their offspring:

Life-threatening external reality and terror reinforced their internal fears and made it more difficult for them to differentiate between internal and external reality, and this had an impact on their defences [sic]. It caused them to react to their external world with behavior dominated by fantasies and unconscious fears evoked by their parents’ Holocaust past. (2012, p. 15)

One of many important implications of this study is the way in which Kogan’s ability to treat these cases was markedly improved by conceptualizing the patients’ defensive structures across generations and in the context of their parents’ traumatic experiences. Understanding the potential impact of trauma on the defensive structures of the individuals who survived traumatic experiences has significantly changed the strategies and outcomes of therapeutic treatments. Understanding the potential impact of a parent’s traumatic experiences on the development of a



child's psychic structure had, in Kogan's cases, a similar effect, one that may be applicable to a myriad of clinical presentations. Arguably, conceptualizing individuals' defensive structures in terms of inherited distress could have profound implications for the treatment of any patient.

Kogan (2012) writes that “[b]oth cases are marked by great confusion between past and present, fantasy and reality, internal and external.” (p. 16) In the particular cases of inherited Holocaust trauma Kogan presents, it is likely not only the trauma itself that presents these great confusions but also the process of inheritance. If the trauma that instigates the crumbling of defenses is not trauma directly experienced by the individual now suffering, achieving essential understanding of the self is likely a far more complicated and daunting process. The confusion between past and present is partially a confusion between what belongs to the self and what belongs to the other. This holds true for the confusion between fantasy and reality—the child's fantasy may be the parent's reality, though this may not be known to the child—and the confusion between internal and external. In this way, it is possible that any unresolved psychic experience passed from parent to child might be deeply, terrifyingly confusing; this confusion between self and other is a powerful potential source of annihilation anxiety.

### **Tragedy of the Self in the Face of the Invasive Other**

Laub (2012), an analyst and Holocaust survivor, writes that

One comes to know one's story only by telling it to oneself, to one's internal 'thou'.

Reality, therefore, can be grasped only in a condition of affective attunement with oneself. Massive psychic trauma, however, is a deadly assault, both on the external and the internal 'other', the 'thou' of every dialogic relationship. The executioner does not heed the victim's plea for life, and relentlessly proceeds with the execution. The 'other', the 'thou', who is empathically in tune and responsive to one's needs, ceases to

exist and faith in the possibility of a communication itself dies. There is no longer a 'thou', either outside or inside oneself, a thou whom one can address. An empathic dyad no longer exists in one's internal world representation. There is no one to turn to, even inside oneself. It is an utterly desolate landscape, totally void of life and of humanity, permeated by the terror of the state of objectlessness. It is this state of dread, of catastrophic object loss, that compels the victim to internalize the only object available to him, that of the perpetrator, as a malignant self object, leading to the so-called 'identification with the aggressor'. (p. 41)

If a child's defensive structure is informed, in part, by its parents' defensive structures, deposited representations, and primitive identifications, and if a parent has experienced or is experiencing the dangerous state of near-objectlessness Laub describes, we can see how a complicated defensive structure might be shaped by a parent's traumatic experience. We can also see how Laub's description of internal objectlessness resulting in an internal object representation of the perpetrator might lead to an experience of frequent and debilitating anxiety. If one's internal "thou" is not a representation of a warm, compassionate, and responsive parent but rather a representation of a literal executioner, we can see how one might be predisposed to a problematically fixed reliance on the paranoid-schizoid position:

Confronted with the horrors of emptiness (objectlessness), the most intolerable of states, the victim feels compelled to maintain the relation with the bad 'internal' object at all costs. The traumatized patient, whose ego had been overwhelmed by excessive excitation, his protective shield shattered by the traumatic event and by the loss of the good object, in order to avoid the horrors of objectlessness and the dissolving of psychic structure, holds on to the only object left—the perpetrator-aggressor. (Laub, 2012, p. 45)

Note, here, the “at all costs.” This is essential to understanding the function of the paranoid-schizoid position. Splitting is one of the primary strategies of the ego in this position, and splitting allows actively conflicting information to coexist without conflict. Splitting is an essential process in order for the perpetrator-aggressor to rescue victim from objectlessness. In splitting off the “bad” and “good” parts of the self in order to maintain this internal relationship, the ego is trapped in the paranoid-schizoid position—integration, the most integral aspect of the depressive position, is impossible.

### **The Death Instinct Revisited**

The reader may recall Freud’s proposition of a “death instinct” that becomes more concrete in Klein’s description of the function of annihilation anxiety. Laub (2012) goes on to say that:

The link between trauma and the unleashing of the death instinct derivatives can be found in Freud’s reference to the negative effects of trauma leading to ‘an inhibition—even an inability to deal with life’. Conscious memory is the first casualty of the unbound death instinct derivatives. Furthermore, erasure of traumatically lost objects and of the traumatic experience itself might lead the survivor to complete oblivion, or to doubt the veracity and authenticity of his own experiences. His sense of identity and continuity might be compromised; his ability to invest in intimate relationships might be severely impaired, leading to a life sense of doomed aloneness. (p. 43)

Here we see one way trauma may “unleash” the death instinct and with it, give rise to annihilation anxiety that remains active even after the traumatic situation has come to an end. In a way, this unleashing of the death instinct may mean, for the survivor, that the traumatic situation never ends.

Loewenberg (2012) points to Krystal's 1968 book about psychic trauma in which Krystal writes, "Extreme circumstances of traumatization—disasters, catastrophes, and overwhelming social situations—effect marked changes in the people subjected to them and leave them with lifelong problems." (Krystal, 1968, p. 1) Krystal framed trauma as "a broad social group problem" (Loewenberg, 2012) and sought to determine whether traumatic experiences created "pathological families, groups, and communities" (Krystal, 1968, p. 2). Krystal's answer, Loewenberg writes, was "a distinct yes": "The survivors form abnormal families and communities... The communities are laden with the burden of guilt and shame, and preoccupied with the past." (Krystal, 1968, p. 346)

### **The Reading of the Will: Symptoms of Inheritance**

Loewenberg's writing is predominately clinical. He provides a compelling list of clinical observations from his work with the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors and notes that "we can see the anxieties and defenses associated with former traumas in the here and now." (Loewenberg, 2012, p. 57) I will not elucidate each item on this list, but several are useful for the purposes of the present project. The first of these is a pattern of patients who seek safety and avoid risk, having internalized both conscious and unconscious messages from caregivers about avoiding danger and remaining close to home. Another relevant observation is a pattern of "generalized distrust and insecurity - Particularly of any state or government." (Loewenberg, 2012, p. 57) This is attended by conscious and unconscious messages that one can only trust family and members of shared identity groups.

Particularly of interest is Loewenberg's observation of a pattern of patients choosing careers that allow them to stand at the edge of life and death. Of Loewenberg's eight-person sample, four were physicians: "The undoing and reversal are obvious. Now the sons and

daughters are in the place where they know all the secrets. Instead of a killer SS man who decides on life or death, the adaptation is to become a healer and father-rescuer on the side of life, but with the same excruciating life/death tension.” (Loewenberg, 2012, p. 58) One might interpret this as an attempt to gain mastery over death, the source of debilitating anxiety.

Other patterns Loewenberg found included ambivalence toward parents and grandparents, as well as ambivalence regarding Jewish identity: “The desire to acquire immunity from anti-Semitism, gain the apparent social advantages that non-Jews have in American culture, and avoid potential Holocausts is in tension with shame and guilt at betraying the parent’s cultural identity.” (Loewenberg, 2012, p. 58)

The final two of Loewenberg’s patterns I would like to mention both take the form of explicit symptoms. The first of these is paranoid ideation of persecution: “All opponents instantly become Nazis... There is a sensitivity and expectation of humiliation in group and conflict situations.” (Loewenberg, 2012, p. 58) The second is “Chronic depression and sadness: There is identification with the parents in prolonged mourning over the incredible burden of personal and familial grief, anger and group trauma, over too many irremediable personal losses.” (Loewenberg, 2012, p. 58)

### **Clinical Implications: Inheritance Across Continents**

I am interested in these particular patterns of identity and symptom formation because I imagine that there is considerable likelihood that some or all of them may also play out in the children and grandchildren of immigrants. Of course, most Holocaust survivors are also immigrants—even if they are not technically immigrants, it is highly probable that they experienced forced migration and relocation during and immediately after the Holocaust. Thus there are myriad ways in which these patterns of symptomology might manifest in the

intersections between trauma associated with immigration & assimilation and trauma associated more explicitly with the Holocaust.

Another important factor to consider is the way in which shared familial and cultural narratives of persecution and survival might echo across continents and between traumatic experiences. Perhaps there are ways in which Jews living in the United States during the rise of Nazi power in Europe felt the threat of Nazi persecution to be more pronounced than one might imagine due to their group identifications and the ways in which it mirrored personal or familial experiences of persecution related to emigration, immigration, and assimilation pressures. All of these potential factors combine to form my hypothesis that American Jews who immigrated to the United States both before and after the Holocaust might manifest some or all of the symptom patterns Loewenberg describes.

Loewenberg, Caruth, Freud, and psychoanalysis in general suggest that we must repeat what we have not processed and cannot resolve. Research on the transmission of trauma between generations tells us that we may take on the “task”, in Fromm’s words, of the unresolved trauma of our parents and their parents. Presumably, we might pass the task of resolving trauma from one generation to the next indefinitely.

If we return to Caruth’s writing on Freud in the introduction to this paper, we will recall the notion of “the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind.” (Caruth, 1996, p. 2) While such an event being traumatic in nature is only one of the possible reasons a person might be unable to leave it behind, Caruth writes:

What seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that, like

Tancred's first infliction of a mortal wound on the disguised Clorinda in the duel, is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. Just as Tancred does not hear the voice of Clorinda until the second wounding, so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on. (Caruth, 1996, p. 4)

Perhaps, then, the trauma of the Holocaust was not available, or not entirely available, or available enough, to the person who survived it. Perhaps the trauma becomes available for healing as it is transmitted, as it is reenacted, reactivated, as it, in a sense, returns for the first time. Similarly, perhaps the trauma of immigration, the trauma of assimilation, the traumatic grief associated with the loss of home and of cultural and familial identity can only be known in a fraction of its depth by the person who moves. Perhaps the person who turns away from an historical cultural self and chooses to invest in an alternate cultural future cannot fully know their loss. Perhaps this loss must be repeated in some form through generations before the wound can be healed, before the immigrant can hear the voice issuing from the wound of diaspora.

Importantly, the message this voice carries—the symptom of the trauma—will most likely obfuscate the initial trauma to some extent. Caruth writes:

[Trauma] seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed

appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (Caruth, 1996, p. 4)

This is, I am suggesting, a key to how we might utilize the map of annihilation anxiety. If annihilation anxiety is the cry, we might find our way through it to the trauma of assimilation, of persecution—to a trauma of a people choking under the literal and metaphorical pressure of threat to survival.

### **Inversion and Reversal: Changing Roles in the Theater of Trauma**

As Loewenberg (2012) points to, the roles in the reenactment of trauma--in the expression of the symptom, the articulation of the wound--are not fixed. In other words, Freud's repetition compulsion may be a dynamic enactment of a traumatic experience in which the victimized person assumes the role of the victimizer. Perhaps this is at least partially the result of what Laub (2012) describes as the loss of the internal thou and the subsequent substitution of the aggressor, but it also seems possible that the previously weak and damaged subject would sometimes seek--unconsciously--to occupy the position of the powerful and damaging object, in turn subjugating another and perpetuating a cycle of traumatic experience.

It is in this vein that Loewenberg (2012) insists that the "militancy and abrasiveness" of Israel's foreign and occupation policy can only be understood through an examination of the psychodynamic forces of intergenerational trauma. In Loewenberg's assessment, "Those who, two generations ago, were--in the classic Freudian definition of trauma--helpless, impotent, and hopeless, are now self-confident, competent to defend themselves, and able to exercise options of self protection." (p. 65)

The role of Israel-as-symptom will be considered further in the final chapter of this paper. For now, let us conclude by briefly examining the character of Moses introduced earlier at the



opening of this study. There are ample parallels to be drawn between the story of Exodus and the perils faced by Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe, one of which is the changing position of the subjugated Jews.

In Exodus Pharaoh feels threatened by the size of the Jewish population and its role in the economy and counters this threat by brutally enslaving the Jewish people. Moses, a Jew condemned by Pharaoh to death at birth, escapes this fate and is raised as Pharaoh's grandson. When Moses reaches adulthood, he becomes aware of himself as a Jew and stands up to the violent injustice of Pharaoh. God then partners with Moses, insisting that Moses demand Pharaoh "Let [his] people go!"

This demand is not peaceful. One by one, God grants Moses the power to cast plagues upon Egypt and Pharaoh's people suffer extremely for their leader's transgressions. The subjugation and perpetration of violence is reversed. Moses, the leader of the suffering Jews, now creates the suffering. Where once the Jews were powerless in the face of their enslavement, they now have the hand of God – the most extreme power imaginable – passing through the staff of their human leader. No longer weak, they rain destruction upon Egypt: locusts and frogs, illness and darkness brought by Moses, the formerly condemned Jew.

There is much to be gained, clinically and from the perspective of social justice work, from looking at the way in which inherited trauma can take the form of reversed roles or turned tables. Most notably, it is imperative that clinicians and social justice advocates be attuned to the possibility that expressions of violence and subjugation might be symptoms of inherited trauma most effectively treated or addressed as such. Maintaining a dynamic orientation to the origins of the most heinous behaviors, actions, and policies is a vital strategy for social workers operating in any context. To do otherwise strikes me as an uncanny perpetuation of the dynamics of

inherited trauma, in which the trauma goes unacknowledged and thus its burden is transmitted to subsequent generations.

Lastly, it is necessary to revisit Klein's linking of the feeling of persecution and the feeling of aggression. (Segal, 1973) As discussed in the previous chapter, the drive toward death and the fear of being killed are in active and dynamic relationship in the infant's – and adult's – psyche. Though Klein is thinking about an internal, psychic experience, perhaps this theory applies in situations where the external threat of persecution is very real. Perhaps the experience of persecution cannot be endured without, to some extent, being transmuted into the experience of aggression. Perhaps one cannot experience the threat of death without simultaneously experiencing the wish to kill. Contemporary laws allowing for deadly harm in the case of self-defense might suggest that such a transmutation is so fundamental as to defy the constraints of morality. If this is the case then perhaps the inverse is also true and acts of aggression can be found to contain an inextricable – and inexplicable – fear of persecution.

In the following chapter, we will explore the relationship between diasporic process and cultural assimilation. As we do so, I ask that the reader maintain an awareness of the relationship between trauma and overwhelm, thus considering that the process of immigration and cultural assimilation is a traumatic one, even in the best of circumstances.

## CHAPTER IV

### **Becoming/Unbecoming: Jewish Diaspora and Cultural Assimilation**

This chapter will take up the concept of Jewish diaspora in a specific context. While Moses's exile and the forty years he and his fellow Jews spent wandering in the desert offers us a neat origin of Jewish diaspora, there are plenty of nearly-contemporary examples of Jewish people who chose or were forced to leave their homelands in order to survive. In the following pages I will consider the large emigration of Jews from Europe to the United States in the late nineteenth century. In particular, I seek to explore the process of Jewish racial and cultural assimilation in the United States at this time, focusing in particular on the ways in which that process includes profound experiences of loss and threat to the self.

The emigration of European Jews to the United States in the late nineteenth century was in some ways more complicated than later Jewish emigration because the question of whether Jews were white had yet to be resolved. Thus the attendant question of where--in a society whose social and economic stratifications were largely determined by race--Jews would fit also remained to be answered. It was largely through the process of Jewish cultural and ethnic assimilation in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century that Jews in the United States *became* white. The risks and rewards of the racial and cultural assimilation demonstrated by European immigrant Jews in late nineteenth century America are important context for the later influx of European Jewish refugees who came to the United States during the Nazi occupation of Europe.

## **Changing Colors: Racial Identity and Jewish Identity in the United States**

In thinking about Jewish emigration to the United States we find unavoidable questions about the concept of racial identity. In particular, one can look at the narrative of Jewish assimilation to the United States as a process through which some Jews became white. That is to say, for some Jews, the process of becoming white was either simultaneous to or synonymous with the process of becoming American. Initially racially marked such that they were culturally understood as not-white--and understood themselves that way as well--over a relatively short amount of time, Jewish citizens of the United States became white citizens. (Goldstein, 2006)

In her essay on the cultural forces that facilitated Jews becoming white, Sacks writes:

I continue to be surprised to read that America did not always regard its immigrant European workers as white, that it thought people from different nations were biologically different. My parents, first-generation U.S.-born eastern European Jews, are not surprised. They expect anti-Semitism to be part of the fabric of daily life, much as I expect racism to be part of it. (1998, p. 395)

Sacks goes on:

The United States has a long history of anti-Semitism and of beliefs that Jews were members of an inferior race... American anti-Semitism was part of a broader pattern of late-nineteenth-century racism against all southern and eastern European immigrants...

The U.S. 'discovery' that Europe had inferior and superior races came in response to the great waves of immigration from southern and eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century. Before that time, European immigrants--including Jews--had been largely assimilated into the white population. The twenty-three million European

immigrants who came to work in U.S. cities after 1880 were too many and too concentrated to disperse and blend. Instead, they piled up in the country's most dilapidated urban areas, where they built new kinds of working-class ethnic communities. (1998, p. 396)

Sacks suggests that before economic and social conditions in Europe became increasingly untenable for Jews, the Jewish immigrant population in the United States was small enough that European Jews were not marked as a group, per se. Not being marked as a group meant that European Jews were also not racially marked as non-white, or if they were, there was no particular threat associated with those racial markers. Without threat attached to racial markers (in this case: Jewish identity, Jewish religious practice, physical characteristics generally associated with Jewish heritage), no narrative of Jewish inferiority was required through which mainstream white American society could seek to manage that threat.

As the number of Jewish--and other European--immigrants to the United States increased significantly over the course of the nineteenth century, their otherness became marked in a new way, visible in a new way, threatening in a new way. It was at this time, when Jews were part of a distinct and potentially unassimilable group, that Jews ceased to blend easily into mainstream white American society. Jews lost access to an immediate experience of whiteness and were seen as not only racially distinct, but racially inferior. (Sacks, 1998)

This is one of the reasons that the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth provides such important context to this study. In the years following the official abolition of slavery in the United States, the definition of race was a fraught process with high stakes. Not unimportantly, the process and meaning involved in defining race in post-slavery America bears marked similarity to the process and meaning of defining Jewish ethnicity in Nazi-ruled Europe.

This similarity is perhaps most interesting in light of the myriad ways in which the dynamics of Jewish racial and ethnic identity--and thus oppression--worked differently in the contexts of the post-Civil War United States and between-World-Wars Europe.

While this paper endeavors to explore the experience of Jewish assimilation to the United States in terms of whiteness and white identity, it should be noted that not all American Jews are white, and thus that this exploration applies relatively narrowly to a particular population of American Jews. Perhaps there are some elements of the theoretical undertaking to follow that may resonate with non-white Jews in the United States, but because whiteness is a central aspect of this investigation, many American Jews will not find their experience discussed in this paper. Because I am dealing explicitly and exclusively with the experience of white American Jewish identity, I may at times, for the sake of style, brevity, or simple omission, seem to suggest that white American Jewish experience is the only Jewish identity in the United States. Let me be clear that I understand that this is not the case.

As we begin to think about the process of Jewish assimilation to the United States in the late nineteenth century, it is necessary to first consider the cultural context of Jewish emigration from Europe. Miller and Garran (2008) write that “Jews arrived in this country after enduring centuries of religious and ethnic hostility, prejudice, and violence throughout the European continent.” Many Jews left Europe to escape this hostility, prejudice, and violence, which is one of the reasons that the narrative of Jewish immigration to the United States is often presented as a narrative of success and triumph. But Goldstein (2006) suggests that:

American Jews’ struggle with whiteness, however, suggests that the story of racial assimilation in the United States cannot be reduced to a simple morality tale. To the extent that historians of whiteness have understood the constraints and pressures placed

on acculturating immigrants by American racial culture, they have brushed over these themes to assert that identifying as white was largely a matter of individual choice. 'White ethnics, while they lived under conditions not of their own choosing,' writes David Roediger, 'by and large chose whiteness, and even struggled to be recognized as white.' Positing the 'whitening' of immigrants as a power play from below, however, minimizes the degree to which they were pushed toward whiteness by the needs of the larger, white society. In many ways it was native-born whites, bent on preserving a stable and optimistic vision of their national culture, who had the greatest stake in seeing Jews take on the role of white Americans. (p. 5)

Even when we allow for a more nuanced understanding of this "push toward whiteness" and its potential ramifications, it is easy to continue to see the process of Jewish assimilation as a story whose ending we know. But when we see the process of Jewish assimilation as one in which European Jews successfully became white but fail to see the cost of Jewish whiteness and the process of racialization--of becoming white; in effect neutralizing the concept of "Jew" as a racial marker--as complex and dynamic, we obfuscate important elements of Jewish American identity and the psychic struggle and discomfort that results.

My intention in this chapter and in this study is not to somehow argue against Jewish whiteness. I do not mean to suggest that Jews did not "successfully" become white, but rather that that "success" brought with it significant, complicated, painful loss, and that this loss may exact a toll on the American Jewish psyche. In striving to complicate the narrative of successful assimilation, in no way do I aim to diminish the powerful, damaging dynamics of white supremacy and the massive, marked privilege to which white Jews gained access.

In speaking of the potential costs associated with Jews becoming white, it is worth attending to the language Goldstein uses above when he writes that the Jews experienced “a push toward whiteness.” Notably, Goldstein suggests that that push came from “the needs of the larger, white society.” Here we see evidence that the adoptive homeland had conditions for acceptance. If this “push toward whiteness” required pulling away from an ethnic Jewishness, this process could be interpreted in psychoanalytic terms: the opportunity for closeness with the caregiver-motherland requires a sacrifice or dissolution of self.

### **A Dynamic Tension: Apart and a Part**

Goldstein (2006) writes that part of the dynamic of Jewish assimilation to American culture and to whiteness involved a marked tension between Jews’ desire to assimilate and become an integrated, accepted part of American culture and the ways in which Jewish cultural identity was distinct and important.

Another factor complicating the Jews’ relationship to whiteness was their own intricate means of self-definition. While the knowledge that they were considered a problematic group in the American racial schema motivated Jews to try to conform to the prevailing racial paradigm and identify themselves unambiguously as white, their ongoing commitment to a distinctive identity often cut against their attempts to claim whiteness.

(p. 2)

The tension between these conflicting desires was made visible in popular Jewish publications of the nineteenth century, as well as speeches given and statements issued by rabbis and other Jewish community leaders. One of the most notable measures of this conflict is in Jewish responses to the threat of intermarriage. Kaufmann Kohler, son-in-law and disciple to David Einhorn, who was “known as one of those radical of nineteenth-century Reform rabbis,”



(Goldstein, 2006, p. 27) “maintained a strict opposition to intermarriage. ‘Just because we belong to all nations,’ he wrote, ‘we must not lose our identity by being absorbed.’” (Goldstein, 2006, p. 27) Both the threat and language of absorption is worthy of analysis. While Jews strove toward cultural assimilation in some respects, they simultaneously resisted losing their Jewishness in the process of blending into American culture. Discursively, we can see the way that this problematizes the narrative of “becoming part” of American culture. While Jews had a desire to be part of American culture, the desire was largely to be part of American culture *as Jews*. In some ways the United States made this seem possible—many people were jumping into the so-called melting pot. But there was perceived and real danger in melting—in losing a distinct sense of cultural identity in the process of becoming American. Thus, it seems that part of the tension felt by early Jewish immigrants to the United States was the desire to retain their identity as Jews and to be accepted as Americans without needing to erase or otherwise eliminate their marked Jewish identity. Goldstein writes:

Having long been confined to the social margins of the Central and Eastern European societies in which they lived, Jews from those regions had come to see ‘apartness’ as one of the most salient aspects of Jewish identity. As a result, in the American context they often defined themselves as a distinct ‘race,’ a description that captured their strong emotional connection to Jewish peoplehood. As Jews came under increasing scrutiny in American racial discourse, however, they were often torn between their commitment to Jewish racial identity and their desire to be seen as stable members of white society. Jews often tried to obscure, downplay, or tailor their racial self-understanding to conform to the needs of the larger culture, but ultimately it continued to make its claim on them as they fashioned themselves as white Americans. Thus, in multiple ways, claiming the

status of 'whites' in America was far from simple for Jews. It involved a complex emotional process in which conflicting desires for acceptance and distinctiveness often found no easy balance. (p. 3)

Not only was it necessary to maintain a clear sense of "apartness" in order to forestall cultural absorption, "apartness" in and of itself was an integral part of Jewish identity. Thus this tension might be understood through the way in which the very idea of assimilation was anathema for Jewish identity. Even as incentives for assimilation were appealing, the idea of complete successful assimilation ran contrary to central aspects of a Jewish sense of self. As Goldstein writes above, this aspect of Jewish identity evolved, at least in part, in response to the oppression European Jews had faced for centuries. This oppression likely represented itself in narratives of Jewish identity that reinforced notions of Jews as a distinct people, both racially and otherwise. Thus the threat to self--the threat of loss of the self--faced by Jews in the process of becoming white and becoming American was not only in the loss of aspects of the self as defined by Jewishness but also in the loss of aspects of the self as defined by marked difference.

In his paper on Freud's tense and dynamic relationship to his Jewish identity, Frosh (2004) writes that Freud felt "a rather mystical sense of some hidden power drawing [him] toward identification with Jews and Judaism... an explicit recognition of the value of being an 'outsider' to the host Western culture, and an assertive and angry response to anti-Semitism." (p. 310) To varying degrees, these sorts of identifications with Jews and Jewish culture, even for avowed atheists like Freud, was a successful strategy for maintaining a healthy sense of self and identity in an increasingly hostile world. Frosh continues to note the way in which this appears in narratives of "Jewish chosenness." (p. 311)

While Goldstein writes that the racial language employed by Jews in the nineteenth century is rarely seen in contemporary language, and when it is used it is mostly in the context of anti-Semitism, Frosh points out that there are remnants of Jewish racial identity coded in concepts such as “the Jewish mind.” (p. 311) Goldstein writes:

By ‘race’ nineteenth-century Jews meant something different from ‘ethnicity’ in its present usage. Their conception of Jewish distinctiveness was one rooted not in cultural particularity but in biology, shared ancestry, and blood. Such overt racial discourse has usually been treated by modern Jewish historians as the province of antisemites, yet racial language also served as an attractive form of self-expression for Jews. American Jews drew comfort from a racial self-definition because it gave them a sense of stability at a time when many familiar markers of Jewish identity were eroding. (p. 11)

Marking Jewish identity through racial self-definition was a strategy employed to retain a sense of Jewish difference in a cultural context where other markers of Jewish identity were losing visibility. As Jews assimilated to American culture and in so doing relinquished certain aspects of their Jewishness, the narrative of racial difference played a desired role in reifying the definitive nature of Jewish identity. That said, according to Goldstein (2006), “The social conditions that promoted a racial self-definition among Jews in America did not emerge until the 1870s. Before that decade Jews preferred to describe themselves in ways that furthered their unimpeded acculturation into American life.” (p. 12) Goldstein goes on to say that throughout most of the nineteenth century, “Jews in the United states... enjoyed a level of inclusion unmatched at that time in any other setting.” In the European countries from which Jews had emigrated, Jews were generally granted legal rights that paralleled those of other citizens.

However, they were consistently excluded from national institutions, and were thus rarely seen as “authentic Germans, Frenchmen, or Englishmen.” (p. 12) Because the United States

had no royal family, no established church, no landed aristocracy... its national culture was more fluid, diverse, and open to new influences. Under these circumstances, Jews felt themselves to be an integral part of American society and adopted American ways with zeal. (p. 12)

Rather than defining themselves through racial language, newly American Jews “spoke of themselves as a religious community because they felt such a description would ease their adaptation to a country that respected religious diversity.” (p. 12)

Part of what made it possible for Jews to adopt American customs and shed certain aspects of their Jewish identities without feeling their Jewishness was substantially threatened was the fact that before 1870, Jewish immigrants to the United States had relatively little contact with non-Jews. (Goldstein, 2006) Therefore, certain aspects of American culture were attainable to Jews without presenting the dialectical threat to a defined Jewish identity. Goldstein points to Vorspan and Gartner (1970), writing on the history of Jews in Los Angeles, California, who write that “there was a line of social assimilation beyond which the Jews voluntarily did not go.” (Goldstein, 2006. p. 13)

After 1870, however, as Jews began to acquire more wealth and social mobility, Jewish men in particular had increasing contact with non-Jews. Because Jewish women rarely worked outside of the home, more time passed before Jewish women began to have the same level of contact with non-Jews. This increase in social mixing between Jews and non-Jews generated more pronounced social divisions. Social clubs and business organizations that had previously been open to both Jews and white non-Jews began to revise their policies to exclude Jewish

membership. (Goldstein, 2006) Anxiety about Jews—specifically anxiety about Jewish whiteness and cultural assimilation—became more pronounced. It was in this period that mainstream publications saw a marked uptick in anti-Semitic cartoons and articles, including articles that took up the question of Jewish whiteness.

While some authors argued that Jews were white, others strove to stabilize the question of Jewish race by drawing negative comparisons between Jews and African-Americans.

Goldstein writes:

Many commentators remarked on the Jew's dark hair, 'sensual' lips and 'animal' jaw as a way of linking him to well-known stereotypes of the African American... The skin color of Jews, often described as 'swarthy,' was also interpreted as a sign of their connection to blacks. (p. 44)

Such comparisons contained "the underlying message... that Jews and blacks were linked together by their unassailability in American society," (Goldstein, p. 42) posing a moral and social threat.

### **Cultural Assimilation: Anxiety, Modernity, and Identity**

It is here that we may begin to see the ways in which certain elements of Kleinian theory can be applied to the social process of cultural assimilation. We see the ways in which grouping people based on limited characteristics of identity (the characteristics of blackness or Jewishness, for example) involves conceptualizing people as part-objects rather than whole ones. In this way, we can consider a culture rife with racism and other forms of identity-based oppression as occupying the paranoid-schizoid position and therefore particularly vulnerable to fears of persecution and annihilation anxiety.

Goldstein reminds us that as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, anxiety about a rapidly changing modernity gripped the United States and much of the world:

Among the many immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe who arrived on American shores between 1880 and 1924, Jews were the group most identified with the ways of the modern world. Unlike most non-Jewish immigrants, Jews had not been farmers or peasants in Europe, but had practiced trades and professions that eased their transition to the modern urban setting. Upon arrival, they did not usually head for the agricultural regions of the country, but instead remained in the largest cities, where their high concentration led many to see them as epitomizing urban life. (Goldstein, 2006, p. 36)

Jews and modernity were linked in the American imagination as they were in European discourse about modernization. (Goldstein, 2006, p. 37) In considering the psychic and cultural impact of Jewish migration, both forced and chosen, we cannot underestimate the role of industrialization, both in terms of how and why peoples moved throughout, to, and from Europe, and also in terms of the intense anxiety that accompanied the significant changes following from increased industry. In Europe, the ills of modern life were often scapegoated on the Jews--part-objects imbued with the negative aspects of modernity. In the United States, modern development was more widely imagined as positive, with the result that antisemitism was not an immediate solution for the displacement of this cultural anxiety. (Goldstein, 2006, p. 37) But,

This is not to say that Americans had no negative reactions to the pressures and challenges of the modern world. By the late nineteenth century, the decline of individual and community autonomy, the increasing regimentation and mechanization of society, and the permissiveness of urban life all provoked concern, causing clergy, public

officials, businessmen, and others to ponder whether industrial progress could be achieved without damaging the nation's physical and moral integrity...

Not surprisingly, Americans' ambivalent attitudes about modernity resulted in an ambivalent approach toward the Jews who symbolized its changes. (Goldstein, 2006, p. 37)

Goldstein (2006) tells us that the racialized image of Jews at this time was as ambivalent as the attitudes that underscored it. While Jews were seen as a specific, not-white race, the racial attributes associated with Jews were in no way stable or fixed. Jews were sometimes represented as "the embodiment of progressive business techniques, an exemplar of all that was good about the nation's industrial capitalist ethos." (p. 37) Simultaneously, Jews (almost always represented as men) were "seen as the representative of many of modernity's ills—a physical weakling, a carrier of disease, someone who placed personal gain above the 'finer virtues' of polite society." (Goldstein, p. 37)

It may strike the reader familiar with scholarship and discourse on race in the United States that using a racialized figure to ameliorate a culture's anxiety about development and/or morality is not uncommon.

If commentators were certain that the Jews were a distinct 'race,' they could not come to any clear decision on whether they represented a positive or negative force in American life. White American's faith in modernity would not let them make of the Jew an essential 'other,' as he often became in Europe, but neither would their nagging concerns about modern life allow them to suppress their negative views of the Jew. Thus, the Jew remained a figure of uncertainty that could not be pinned down to any clear set of racial criteria. This ambivalence not only affected the place of the Jew in American life, but

also interfered with white American's attempt to construct a stable racial hierarchy, ultimately threatening their own claims to the power of whiteness. (Goldstein, 2006, p. 40)

### **War and Progress: Social Change/Racial Change**

The fraught ambivalence toward Jews in the United States was obviously preferable to and safer than Europe's wholesale casting of Jews as symbolic of society's ills, as evidenced by Jews' frequent emigration to the United States throughout the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. And yet the ambivalence Jews held about their own racial position in American society did not begin to resolve until the end of the Great Depression. Goldstein (2006) writes:

At the height of the Depression, Jews in America could scarcely have been more torn about their place in the American racial system. A growing sense of insecurity heightened their identification with blacks even as it pushed them toward whiteness. Increasing attacks from hostile forces intensified their feelings of "racial" pride and solidarity while also underscoring the danger of being seen as distinct in race. With white Americans both demanding the assimilation of the Jews and setting up social barriers that prevented their entry into the white mainstream, there seemed to be little hope that these disturbing tensions would soon disappear. (p.189)

In his effort to implement the New Deal, President Franklin D. Roosevelt made explicit overtures toward Jews, inviting them to hold governmental office and participate in white society to an unprecedented degree. While these strategies faced opposition, within only a few years the effects of the President's inclusion of Jews were visible; Jews became ever more present in areas of white society that had previously excluded them. (ibid.) As Roosevelt began to campaign for a



second presidential term, he relied heavily on the support of Jewish and Catholic constituents, a reality that led him to “express the view that immigrant groups had become ‘fully American’ ...” In the years that followed the United States took up arms against the Nazis and proclamations of racial unity were central to the war effort. The government implemented steps to simplify racial categories, marking new European emigres as “white” rather than making use of the more rigorous subcategories of ethnicity formerly employed. “[T]he government’s attempts to both counter prejudice and stabilize racial boundaries help to relieve much anxiety about the place of Jews in national life.” (Goldstein, 2006, p. 193) The category of “race” was now applied more specifically to people of color, while the term “ethnicity” was used to differentiate between groups of white people. (ibid.)

If the events of World War II helped to diminish concern about the far reaching racial characteristics of Jews and offered them a significant level of incorporation into white America, however, these changes did not reflect a growing comfort with Jewish group separatism... This meant that as Jews integrated into the white mainstream, they were expected to keep expressions of group difference at a level that would not offend the sense of unity and homogeneity from which whites of the postwar era drew their confidence and stability. (ibid. p. 194)

### **Fitting In: Jews in America & Psychoanalysis in Science**

It is here that I would like to turn our attention to the experience of Jewish political emigres and refugees in the United States during and following World War II. In particular, I wish to return to Kuriloff’s (2014) work on the meaning and relevance contained in the omission of discussion of the Holocaust from the work produced by Jewish psychoanalysts before, during, and immediately after the war. In considering the myriad possibilities as to why and how Jewish

analysts kept quiet about their experiences of exile, their histories of persecution, and even their very identities as Jews, Kuriloff writes:

... I might begin by suggesting that the predominantly Jewish European analysts of the 1930s – vilified, marginalized, and expelled from their homelands on threat of death– experienced difficulty holding this version of reality in mind alongside the life they had previously enjoyed and hoped to regain in a new world. As Akhtar (2009) notes, forced exile leave little room for “nostalgic ruminations,” so that “representations of the [home] land are themselves sent into intrapsychic exile” (p. 92) More pointedly, as the Austrian émigré analyst Fredrick Wyatt (1988) explains, “adaptation to a new culture inevitably means giving up what, in essence, has been an integral part of one’s self” (p. 148).” (p. 2)

Kuriloff goes on to explicitly suggest that to some degree a process of dissociation may have been at play. That is to say, the experience of persecution, oppression, and the resulting anxiety experienced in Nazi occupied Europe could not exist concurrently with either the memories of an earlier European life or the present experience in the United States. Thus, some part of the analyst-emigres’ identities and experiences may have been psychically excised in order to maintain the ability to function.

Moreover, for many Jews who fled Nazi occupied Europe, there remained an understandable link between Jewish identity and the threat of death. Kuriloff writes:

Disenfranchised and nearly killed precisely because Nazi law deemed them “racially” Jewish, many [relocated psychoanalysts] distanced themselves further. Thomas Kohut, Ph.D. (personal interview, 2012), a psychoanalyst and professor of History... reports that his father, Heinz Kohut [also a psychoanalyst], did not want his American-born son

to know he was Jewish because, as he puts it, “He was afraid I’d be killed. He was trying to protect me from what happened to his own family in Vienna.” Heinz Kohut’s fear apparently never ebbed, for one of the last things he told his son before he died was, reportedly, this injunction: “If I had a son, I should never have him circumcised.”

In a similar vein, psychoanalyst Robert Prince (2009) notes Ostow’s comment that a “gentleman’s agreement” existed among postwar analysts, wherein “one does not discuss Jewishness” (p. 150)... According to Aron (2007), most disturbing to Kohut about this Jewish heritage was that in Europe “to be Jewish was to be treated as nonhuman” (p. 414). (p. 10)

### **Jewish Whiteness Revisited: Cost and Benefit**

One of the reasons that an examination of Jewish whiteness is central to the process of Jewish diaspora and the so-called success of Jewish immigrants to the United States is that it cannot escape notice that skin color and ethnically-determined physical characteristics play a role in whether one can or cannot hide or transmute certain parts of their racial or ethnic identities. The fact that Jewish analysts and other Jews who emigrated to the United States had the option of hiding their Jewishness or otherwise ignoring their Jewish history and identity markedly differentiates the experience of those Jewish emigres from that of some other immigrant populations. While it is arguable that there are ethnic characteristics associated with Jewishness, some of which were discussed earlier in this chapter, if it was possible for Jews to come to the United States from Europe and not be marked as Jews, those physical characteristics, at least in some cases, must not always be predominant. This is to say, that the fact that so many European Jews who came to the United States had white skin played an enormous role in their ability to

pass as not-Jewish and to become white Americans, with all of the privileges that new identity contained.

Nevertheless, the main contention of this chapter remains. While many European Jews came to the United States with a variety of incentives for hiding or ignoring or otherwise dissociating their Jewish identities and histories, and while many of them were able to do so because of the color of their skin, the narrative of the Jewish diaspora extending to the United States cannot be seen as a simple success story. As we have seen, the process of hiding or shedding or forgetting one's identity comes at a price. The particularity of the cost of this loss of self may vary by individual or by family, but the potential for a cost may not. Letting go of or actively forcing away central markers and tenants of one's sense of self, familial and cultural identity, and relationship to history brings with it the possibility of substantial fragmentation of the psyche. While this fragmentation might be possible to navigate and may even be a worthwhile price to pay for the ability to live without a consistent threat of death, I would argue that what we have seen of annihilation anxiety and inherited trauma suggests that this process of cultural assimilation could exact a significant toll on one's psychic integration and well-being.

## CHAPTER V

### **Jewish Annihilation Anxiety: An Extended Experience**

There are many ways in which one could frame an exploration of the intersections between annihilation anxiety and Jewish history, experience, and identity. As this chapter will contend, annihilation anxiety is plentiful in Jewish experience. In this chapter we will use the particular experience of diaspora and cultural assimilation and their attendant experiences of threat to survival as a frame for exploring what I am calling “Jewish annihilation anxiety.” My conceptualization of Jewish annihilation anxiety draws from both the concept of annihilation anxiety as an internal experience, framed by Freud and Klein, and from thinking on annihilation anxiety as attendant to or resulting from external experiences of threat and trauma, as explored in the second chapter of this paper.

#### **Diaspora and Threat to Survival**

As with the biblical story of Exodus, narratives of diaspora run throughout Jewish history and experience. As is the case with many diasporic peoples, much of Jewish movement between lands, across borders, and overseas has been forced, either in the form of explicit expulsion or relocation or because leaving one home for another was the only hope for survival. Kogan (2012) writes that for the children and grandchildren of victims and survivors of Nazi persecution, this history presents as a reluctance to travel far from home and an unspoken imperative that they attend school, find work, and create families without straying far from their parents’ homes. Perhaps this is an unconscious participation in an intergenerational narrative that includes the

potent possibility that the entire family will need to pack and travel in the middle of the night to escape some as-yet-unknown force. Perhaps it is a response to an implicit or explicit communication that the world is dangerous and filled with those who aim to destroy us and thus staying close to home is the only way to insure safety.

“Jewish annihilation anxiety” refers to a particular manifestation of annihilation anxiety, one that includes both the experience of the biblically enslaved and persecuted Jew and also the experience of the tormented, inhibited, persecuting Pharaoh. As Freud helps us understand, Jewish annihilation anxiety also includes the experience of the sadistic and confusing God who acts as puppeteer in a deathly drama in which almost no one can win.

In this chapter we will examine each of these positions as they relate to the psychic experience of Jewish annihilation anxiety. We will look at the fear-of-impending-death as experienced by the persecuted and enslaved Jew. We will look at the fear-of-loss-of-self as experienced by the cruel-yet-helpless Pharaoh. And we will look at the role-of-an-all-powerful-God, whose might is unquestionable and fearsome.

### **Broad City, Broad Recognition**

For some readers, the proposition that a fear of or preoccupation with death is a widely recognizable part of Jewish experience and identity might be unfamiliar. To illustrate the breadth of this trope, I point to an episode of the Comedy Central series *Broad City*. *Broad City* is a sitcom about two young Jewish women, best friends living in New York City. The episode at issue here opens with the following exchange between Ilana and Abbi, the show’s main characters, as they set out to celebrate Ilana’s twenty-third birthday:

Ilana: I've been spending all morning writing out my will. My dad says it's never too early and I agree.

Abbi: God, you're only 23, dude.

Ilana: Okay, you know what? My people plan for death, Abbi.

Abbi: I'm Jewish, too.

Ilana: Okay, but you're a Main Line Jew? New York Jews wake up every day just thinking about how they're going to die.

Abbi: I think about death! (Glazer and Jacobson, 2015)

“My people plan for death, Abbi,” Ilana tells her friend, and Abbi’s response communicates her annoyance: “I’m Jewish, too.” When Ilana tries to explain why she is perhaps more aware of her impending demise than her friend, Abbi’s defensiveness increases: “I think about death!” Here we see not only an illustration of the idea that Jewish people are obsessed with impending death, but also an illustration of the way in which this obsession with impending death is a marker of Jewish identity. Ilana’s suggestion that Abbi is less focused on death is taken as a dismissal of Abbi’s Jewish identity, provoking Abbi to irritation. The forcefulness of Abbi’s response, “I think about death!”, is the forcefulness of someone whose identity is being threatened—and it’s also the joke. For both women, their Jewishness is marked by “waking up every day just thinking about how they’re going to die.”

This is a precise demonstration of both the concept of Jewish annihilation anxiety and its prevalence. The humor in this exchange is partially contained in the ridiculousness of a twenty-three-year-old person spending her birthday writing out her will, of course. But it is also contained in the recognition the viewer is expected to feel—either as a Jew who shares Ilana and Abbi’s fixation on death or has seen it in their relatives and friends, or as a non-Jew who can identify this cultural trope.

## **Fear of Loss-of-the-Object, Fear of Castration: Exodus's Distress in Contemporary Jews**

It is notable that Ilana does not say she wakes up every day in crippling fear of death. She wakes up every day “thinking about how [she is] going to die,” a statement that implies that death occurs to New York Jews in a placid meditation immediately upon rising. From the blasé way she announces her day’s activities, Ilana’s birthday was presumably spent in relative calm as she scrawled her will on a cocktail napkin. This activity is not the activity of someone whose psyche is crippled by the anxiety of her impending demise, but how can there not be an element of anxiety present in someone who spends her twenty-third birthday planning for her death? Ilana’s placidity in reporting this activity to Abbi illustrates another central element of Jewish annihilation anxiety—while there is likely a severe form of this anxiety that is of the psychotic, disorganized and disorganizing variety indicated by Klein, the Jewish annihilation anxiety to which I wish to attend takes a more pervasive, persistent tone. Rather than crippling its sufferer entirely, it instead informs every aspect of her life—appearing every morning and on her birthday, making itself easy fodder for jokes.

While there are ways in which the idea of Jewish annihilation anxiety could be extended to any group that has faced persecution in the form of annihilation, there is much to be made of the fact that not every group-affiliation-based annihilation anxiety can be joked about in this particular way. At the time of this writing, for example, the repeated killings of Black Americans by police officers, combined with the systematic incarceration of Black men in the United States means that a joke about a Black man writing his will on his twenty-third birthday would be pointed in a way that *Broad City*’s joke is not. While Ilana and Abbi might wake up every day thinking about how they are going to die, they do not live every day with a reasonable expectation that their lives and the lives of their families are in real and immediate danger. Part



of how the joke works is in its reference to past persecution, in its reference to inherited trauma, to the intergenerationally transmitted neurosis that defines their relatively safe lives: “My dad says it’s never too early and I agree.” The juxtaposition of Ilana’s youth and safety with the act of writing out her will is funny because it is dissonant. A similar joke with Ilana’s Black boyfriend, Lincoln, as its subject, might still be funny, but its humor would turn on the poignant reality that because he is Black, Lincoln’s relative youth decreases his safety and increases the likelihood that he will be killed or incarcerated.

Broad City’s joke is an illustration of the fear-of-impending-death seen in the character of the enslaved and persecuted Jew who is suffering at the hands of Pharaoh and expecting, at best, a short and miserable life. It is an illustration of an experience of annihilation anxiety that has been, in a sense, nurtured. As discussed by Fromm (2012), this annihilation anxiety was planted in Ilana and Abbi in the form of a real and recent history of persecution, perhaps drawing some of its potency from more distant historical and even biblical narratives of persecution. We can consider this annihilation anxiety trauma-informed or trauma-inspired. Ilana and Abbi experience a vigilance passed on to them from previous generations who relied on that vigilance to survive. This is a vigilance to which Abbi and Ilana have become attached. This vigilance defines their experience of their identity--to be vigilant about death is to be Jewish. To expect the worst, to expect continued enslavement and persecution is the lot of the Jew enslaved to Pharaoh and the lot of the young adult Jew coming of age in contemporary New York. While the threat itself has changed substantially, changes in the resulting anxiety are not as substantial as one might expect.

### **Fear of Loss-of-Self: Pharaoh and Woman in Gold**

To illustrate the fear-of-loss-of-self, the narrative of Pharaoh whose entire being becomes occupied by a tormenting, confusing God, let us turn to the 2015 film *Woman in Gold*. The film's protagonist, Maria, an elderly Jewish woman who fled Nazi persecution in her youth, returns to Austria from her adopted homeland of the United States to fight for her right to a number of famous paintings the Nazis stole from her family. Toward the end of the movie we see a flashback to the day Maria fled Austria with her husband. Maria's father, bedridden and under house arrest, takes her in his arms and tells her, "When the Jews came to Austria, we had nothing. But we did everything we could to contribute and belong and we are proud of what we have done." (Curtis, 2015)

This moment illustrates what may be a more insidious aspect of Jewish annihilation anxiety. Here is a family, a people, at a crucial diasporic moment. The Jews, Maria's father tells her, came to Austria with nothing. But they *worked hard to belong. To contribute*. Despite the wretched moment in which Maria and her father stand—a moment that is itself evidence that they clearly *did not succeed* in their work to belong—they are proud. The implication is that Maria and her husband will arrive in America and they, too, will not belong. They, too, will have nothing. But they should work hard. They should contribute. They should do what they can to belong. To survive. They should hope for a better outcome than the one Maria's dying father faces.

Maria's father continues: "I ask you only one thing. Remember us. Take us with you in your heart and learn to be happy again." While his conscious wish may be for Maria to learn to be happy again, we can also see the way in which he sends his unresolved trauma with her; the "us" he asks her to take in her heart may be partly the strong, successful parents she once knew,

but now it is also the dying, condemned parents sitting before her and the many, many people whose only chance for survival is in the hearts of those who escape.

Another important part of Maria's father's bequest is the message to "work hard to belong." As Maria flees almost certain death at the hands of the Nazis, this is a message to make her Jewish self small. Not just small—*smaller still*. "We worked hard to belong," Maria's father says. He doesn't add, "But not hard enough"; he doesn't need to. The violence unfolding outside their apartment, the uniformed Nazi officer who is maintaining their house arrest, render this utterance unnecessary. Maria and her husband will have to work *harder*. And working hard to belong, in this context, means working hard to assimilate. To successfully join the mainstream culture of their new home because the mainstream culture of their current home, the place they were born and raised, seeks to annihilate them. "Work hard to belong and work hard to contribute" might translate as "Make yourself indispensable and survive." Assimilation and contribution are necessary to survival.

In the occupied country Maria and her husband are fleeing, the moment for assimilation has passed; the Jews have failed to belong. What's left, then, is to move to a new culture and let that new culture occupy them, which means inviting an invasion that will result in at least a partial loss of self. When Maria arrives in Austria, the man who checks her into her hotel notices her accent and asks, in Austrian, if she speaks German. Maria replies harshly, in English, that yes, she does speak German but she prefers to speak in English. The most accessible message here is Maria's act of resistance—her rejection of the language of her persecutors. But this moment contains more than a rejection of the culture that turned on Maria and her family with deadly force. Maria has also relinquished the language of her childhood, of her homeland and her home, the language in which she bade her family farewell and promised her father she would

carry his memory. In its place, she has claimed a new language, a language that marks the distance between her European self and her American self—the distance she traveled to survive.

Here, we take Klein's theorizing about the role of the internalized caregiver and apply it to a culture more broadly. If we think of the nationstate as caregiver, as mother—motherland—we see Maria's exchange with her father in a more dynamic light: Maria is a woman rejected by her motherland. Not just rejected; Maria's motherland does not merely seek to cast her out, it seeks to exterminate her. Her only option for survival is to leave her ailing, condemned motherland—and actual mother—and find a new motherland willing to adopt her. She must then crush or hide or alter or expel some part of herself—some essential, fundamental part of her identity—in order to guarantee the unconditional love and protection of this new motherland. She must allow her adoptive motherland to enter her, to reconstruct her, so that she can become an adequate daughter. She must annihilate herself to become someone who belongs.

It is possible to conceptualize this interaction between Maria and her father, Maria and Austria, Maria and the United States in Kleinian terms. If we think of the parent's transmitted trauma and the motherland's message of conditional acceptance as internalized voices, perhaps we can see them as Klein's "particularly savage" early superego. As discussed in the early chapter on this topic, this savage, terrifying superego is a primary source of anxiety. The ego, structurally responsible for withstanding and modifying the harshness of the superego, is, in its early form, unable to withstand the superego's attacks and is thus particularly vulnerable to overwhelm.

The reader will recall Goldstein's (2006) writing on the dynamic tension affecting Jewish immigrants to the United States from the late nineteenth century until the end of World War II (p. 1): a pressure to join American society and "become" White and a simultaneous pressure to

retain a sense of Jewish ethnicity and identity as inherently “other” or “outside” American Whiteness. (p. 6) One can conceptualize this tension in Kleinian terms, where the pressure to become both American and White might act as the harsh, punishing superego and the pressure to retain a sense of self as ethnically Jewish and “different” acting as the organizing ego does. The danger to the self arises when the ego function—or the primary sense of ethnic identity—weakens and even crumbles under the pressure to assimilate. It is in this scenario that the process of assimilation is not (only) one of growth and adaptation but is (also) a process of profound loss and psychic disorganization.

In this narrative of internal subjugation to the power of a vicious superego, we see some of Maria’s experience. We also see Exodus’s Pharaoh, unable to withstand the harsh dictates of the God who has overwhelmed his internal capacities and forces him to act against his will. While it is an unnecessary stretch to say that Maria—the assimilating Jew—is forced to act against her will, the similarity in the experience lies in the element of invasion, of overwhelm, in the element of relinquishing the self in the face of the other and the anxiety that results. As I wrote in the chapter on early theoretical conceptualizations of annihilation anxiety, Klein and Freud both believed that the infantile experience of anxiety that exceeds the ego’s ability to defend as related to internal distress rather than external stressors. While the cultural forces creating circumstances requiring cultural assimilation and adaptation of identity are inarguably external stressors, I am interested in the ways in which they are internalized and how, in the process of internalization, they might induce a version of this early anxiety experience. Specifically, I am suggesting that the position of the assimilating or assimilated subject is, at least in part, a version of the paranoid-schizoid position, defined and created by persecutory anxiety, and that this anxiety is not unlike the experience of Pharaoh, dominated by a God from

whose grip he cannot shake himself free. I am also suggesting that the dichotomy of annihilation anxiety as either an internal occurrence attendant to early development or an external one attendant to traumatic experience is a false one. Not only is this dichotomy false, it is both unnecessary and diminishes the usefulness of both conceptualizations. In the story of Pharaoh, in the story of Maria, in the story of immigrant experience, we see that these two conceptualizations may work in tandem to describe the experience of an annihilation anxiety that impacts but does not inundate; that changes but does not cripple; that lingers indefinitely.

Aside from the parts of the film that occur in flashback, *Woman in Gold* is a contemporary story. Maria is now elderly. She makes no claims to wanting wealth (she repeatedly tells her lawyer that the only thing she will buy with the proceeds from her lawsuit against her former homeland is a new dishwasher), but she owns a small clothing boutique in Los Angeles, where she lives in a chic bungalow filled with memories of her family and her past. She has no pretensions, but she also doesn't need them. It is clear that she has fulfilled her father's request: she has succeeded in belonging, a success aided, no doubt, but the ways in which Maria's immigrant experience as a Jew in the United States was very different in the years following World War II than it would have been ten or twenty or fifty years prior. Maria's accented English does not diminish her whiteness. Instead, her accent, her Europeaness, her cultural visibility mark her simultaneously as distinguished and as a bit quaint. Her young lawyer, Randy (played by Ryan Reynolds), the son of a friend who also escaped Nazi persecution, is amused by Maria's quaint Europeaness, by her passion for history and for justice. He is dismissive of her drive to reconcile the past, shrugging off her request for help. But before long, Maria instills in Randy the opposite of what her father instilled in her.

While Maria's father begs her to *belong* in the United States, to assimilate, Maria begs Randy to see himself as different, to see his history as distinct and important. The end of the film offers a sort of cultural redemption: Randy's passion for justice, for history, overtakes Maria's. He travels to Austria to argue for Maria's paintings, leaving a defeated and exhausted Maria behind at home. Randy is driven by a satisfying and motivating sense of himself as different--as having a distinct self *in need*. Unlike the marked Jew who fled Austria decades prior, Randy returns to Austria unmarked, white and successful. But Maria's story has become his story. He is now *Jewish*. He is distinct. And he is powerful in this distinction. He looks up during his argument and sees Maria in the audience--she has drawn strength from Randy's inherited sense of purpose and traveled to join him. They win. The paintings will be returned to Maria's custody. The Austrian officials are contrite in a way that is humorous for its inadequacy. Maria will get her dishwasher. And Randy is the real beneficiary of this tale--he is not only professionally successful, but he now has what had been lost. More valuable than the multi-million dollar paintings is Randy's sense of self as a Jew, scrubbed away by assimilation and time and reinstilled by conflict and effort, strife and history.

In other words, *Woman in Gold's* Randy is *Exodus's* Moses. Initially unaware of his people and their plight, Randy discovers who he is and in this identity he also finds a startling capacity. He fights for the rights of his people and, like Moses, he wins not only freedom for his people but an identity and sense of purpose for himself.

### **Jewish Annihilation Anxiety: Why Bother?**

So what, then, is the relevance and usefulness of Jewish annihilation anxiety as a concept? I contend that its presence in representations of Jewish experience is significant enough to warrant this in-depth conceptualization, and that its appearance in representations of Jewish

experience points to a likelihood that it is a significant part of Jewish experience and identity for some, if not many, Jews. If it exists as a notable element of American Jewish culture and identity, it is arguably worth understanding.

My assumption that this is the case brings us to the second way in which a conceptualization of Jewish annihilation anxiety may be useful. Because so many Jewish people work as therapists and social workers, people whose professions require that they be aware of and engaged with their own anxieties and identity-defining characteristics, the conceptualization of Jewish annihilation anxiety may be useful in understanding clinical interactions between Jewish therapists and non-Jewish clients as well as between Jewish clients and non-Jewish therapists. Presumably, one's experience of Jewish annihilation anxiety might have an impact on one's interactions with non-Jews, as this anxiety hinges, in part, on an unconscious expectation and experience of persecution by non-Jewish people. For Jewish clinicians, this anxiety may interrupt one's work with non-Jewish clients. For non-Jewish clinicians, this anxiety may arise in one's clients and an awareness of that possibility may be useful in treatment.

I am also inclined to note that so much of the way that contemporary anti-Semitism functions in the United States takes the form of denying the existence of anti-Semitism. By minimizing and dismissing Jewish people's experience of anti-Semitic thoughts, actions, and statements, the historical threat of anti-Semitism, carried through generations, is distorted and discounted. This is potentially harmful in myriad ways, including that its dismissal discounts very real psychic and lived experiences of contemporary American Jews. This discounting can function as a kind of gaslighting, in which Jewish Americans who feel mildly or explicitly persecuted on the basis of their Jewish identity or heritage may deny their own experience of anti-Semitism, and the anxiety caused by anti-Semitism may be attributed to another cause or to



no cause at all. On the other hand, the discounting of such experiences may lay the groundwork, in part, for assertions that anti-Semitism is a real and present danger to become increasingly virulent and aggressive.

### **Retribution of a Psychotic State: Israel and the Repetition Compulsion**

The latter possibility brings us to the unavoidable issue of Israel. I have struggled with how and when to include a discussion of Israel in this paper. It seemed unconscionable to avoid a discussion of Israel, and yet Israel, in the context of this project, seems like such a massive topic that it requires its own entire chapter, its own entire paper. But here we are.

Loewenberg (2012) writes, “I do not believe that what is perceived as the militancy and abrasiveness of Israeli foreign and occupation policy can be understood without the background psychodynamics of the trauma of the Shoah [Holocaust] as a living presence.” (p. 63) I want to call particular attention to Loewenberg’s use of the word “perceived”. In one sense, this statement could be read as minimizing the militancy and abrasiveness of Israeli foreign and occupation policy. This is not how I read Loewenberg’s words. He goes on to say:

None of [the militancy and abrasiveness of Israeli foreign and occupation policy] can be comprehended without an understanding of the transgenerational transmission of trauma and the need to affirmatively adapt and undo the past trauma that is still so alive. Those who, two generations ago, were—in the classic Freudian definition of trauma—helpless, impotent, and hopeless, are now self-confident, competent to defend themselves, and able to exercise options of self protection. (p. 65)

Loewenberg is attending to the internal experience of Jewish annihilation anxiety, functioning not on the individual level but on the collective level. What in one person looks like waking each morning with thoughts of how one will die turns—in the form of a vast, collectively

inherited, collectively experienced trauma—into the kind of fragmented, irrational, psychotic annihilation anxiety described by Klein and Freud. Where *Broad City* makes a joke that works on the absurdity of a twenty-three-year-old's American woman's preoccupation with her impending death, in the context of prolonged violence, occupation, and varied forms of social and political threat and unrest, such a joke would not work, or would work very differently. Arguably, the militancy and occupation to which Loewenberg points serves the function of making the source of annihilation anxiety real. By engaging in a protracted and violent conflict with Palestine, Israel creates a situation in which there is a present and continued threat to life and safety, a threat that is clearly external and concrete. The internal experience of annihilation anxiety is made manifest, and thus can be contended with, controlled, literally combated.

One could also argue the related point that Israel's military and occupation policies serve to create international distrust toward the state of Israel which then becomes--and is interpreted as--anti-Semitism, further concretizing the external threat. Loewenberg illustrates the fact that the state of Israel is a psychotic state, founded on trauma and repeating its trauma and projecting its trauma in a Freudian repetition compulsion on a scale so large and deadly it resists comprehension.

Loewenberg is also attending to the internal object experience of Israel. In the same way that Klein describes internalized object representations of caregivers who go on to inform who we are and how we relate to others—internalized object representations that exist independently from the actual people on whom they are based—the state of Israel exists, for many American Jews, as an object with a similar function. An internal object, defining itself through inherited trauma, existing independently from the actual, external Israel.

While of course it is essential to understand and engage with the actual, external Israel, for the purposes of this project I am interested in understanding and engaging the internal object representation of Israel. To do this, I would like to draw a parallel between the state of Israel and the confusing, annihilating God of the Exodus story. Like the God who plays both sides, moving Moses to act to free his people and moving Pharaoh to condemn both his people and his slaves, Israel acts with a militancy and abrasiveness that is arguably out of proportion to the threat it experiences. Like the God who forces Pharaoh to his knees in supplication and will not let him free the Jews, Israel's occupation of Palestine is unremittingly violent and sadistic, defying international law and creating a situation for Palestinian people that is impossible at every turn.

Like the confusing character of God, whose motivations cannot be grasped and whose actions cannot be understood, “[the violence of Israeli foreign an occupation policy] cannot be comprehended without an understanding of the transgenerational transmission of trauma and the need to affirmatively adapt and undo the past trauma that is still so alive.” (Loewenberg, 2012, p. 64) That is to say, the policies and actions cannot be understood without the complex and powerful dynamic context of the trauma out of which they were created. The very fact that the policies and relentless violence of Israel seem illogical, unreasonable, points to their origin as a profound trauma, inherently confusing. Loewenberg goes on to say, “Those who, two generations ago, were—in the classic Freudian definition of trauma—helpless, impotent, and hopeless, are now self-confident, competent to defend themselves, and able to exercise options for self protection.” (Loewenberg, 2012, p. 64)

### **Jews' Trauma, God's Trauma: Exodus as Evidence**

How can we analyze the historical or inherited trauma of Exodus's God? Can we look to the authors of that story, perhaps Jews who were already carrying the tremendous weight of a

history filled with expulsion from homelands, quests across deserts, extermination at the hands of pharaohs and kings and natural disasters?

It is likely that there is no way to trace the origin of trauma. Caruth (1996) writes:

[T]rauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (p. 4)

Perhaps trauma moves through time and narrative, generations and individuals, cultures and territories like a wild network of dominos, all propelled to tumbling from the same single tap. But even if the intergenerational nature of trauma ultimately obfuscates trauma itself, if we follow the arguments of Freud and Caruth, of Loeb and Loewenberg, we can get somewhere. If we see the wound—sometimes unrecognizable aside from its wildness, its confusing, astonishing presentation: a twenty-three-year-old's hilarious assertion that she has spent her birthday writing her will, a dying father's plea that his daughter kill some part of herself to stay alive, a nation's violent and illegal occupation of an inadequately armed people; if we see the wound and recognize it *as a wound*, as a communication, a symptom, an utterance that cannot be made any other way, then there is the possibility that we can treat the symptom, heal the wound, acknowledge the utterance.

Kleinman (1995) writes

...[T]he way in which professionals in health institutions think and talk about trauma situates it as an *essential* category of human existence, rooted in individual rather than social dynamics, and reflective more of a medical pathology than of religious or moral

happenings. Psychologists and psychiatrists construct violence as an *event* that can be studied outside of its particular context because of its putative universal effects on individuals. They place it in an overly simple stress model, as the distress produced in a person who has undergone a traumatic episode. Collective trauma is not mentioned. Personification has always been a preferred means of representing the trauma of suffering, as in the Bible and in writing today (Mintz 1984). A group's trauma is pictured in the bodies and words of individuals. (p. 177)

Kleinman's words are an argument for the validity and importance of this paper's thesis: that the collective experience must be considered alongside--and perhaps even ahead of--the individual experience, and that certain elements of experience which might be viewed as pathological may have evolved logically out of historical distress.

**Further implications for social work.** Social workers, therapists, people committed to social justice work on a broad, cultural scale and on a local, individual scale may benefit from further development of the concept of Jewish annihilation anxiety. Social workers who question the military and occupation policies of Israel, or who question the United States' role in facilitating those policies, or who seek to understand the origins and the implications of those policies, may find that the psychodynamic perspectives contained in the concept of Jewish annihilation anxiety allow for a more nuanced and thorough understanding of the forces at work in maintaining these policies and permitting their unremitting and illegal violence. Non-Jewish social workers working with Jewish individuals in psychotherapy and other contexts may find the implications of Jewish annihilation anxiety to effectively illuminate elements of pathology previously misunderstood. Jewish social workers may benefit from understanding ways in which Jewish annihilation anxiety affects their own lived experience and thus their social work practice.

**A final note on god.** Kleinman's words are also a note on that which this paper cannot accomplish: having chosen to illustrate the trauma of "the Jews", broadly, through the story of Exodus, I personified what I then argued belongs to the masses. Moses and the Jews made their way out of the desert, and this paper charted their course. This paper sought to cultivate compassion for Pharaoh and his occupied heart. But Exodus's compelling, sadistic God remains unresolved. I have struggled throughout this writing with the question of God in Exodus-as-allegory.

There is a way in which this struggle to make meaning out of the character of God has come to nothing. I don't know that I can offer a unique insight on God's motivation, God's psychological need, nor can I draw a direct correlation between God's action and a psychoanalytic concept. And yet, the character of God is central in the story of Exodus. The character of God cannot be ignored. And, to be frank, while this paper does not contend with its questions in a truly theological sense, it certainly grapples with questions that occupy theological minds: How do humans cause suffering? How do humans survive suffering? What allows for and what determines survival? So to leave the question of God unaddressed would be to leave this paper unfinished, yet to resolve the question of God – the literary question, the biblical question, the ethical question, the psychoanalytic question – may be roundly considered impossible. Certainly it is not what I intended to undertake here.

And yet: we have seen and explored the ways in which the character of God in the Exodus story is confusing. It is tremendously difficult to follow his affiliations; following his motivations is even harder. Which is to say: God is a mystery. He intervenes in Exodus to simultaneously solve and perpetuate an unbearable problem. In so doing, he wreaks a havoc that cannot be measured. But it would be a mistake to equate this mystery, this immeasurable effect,

this literary presence that has caused me to struggle fruitlessly to generate understanding, with that which can be dismissed. To the contrary, this mystery – the mystery of God – perhaps offers itself to us and to this project the neatest allegory of all. Which is to say: that which seems the most unruly, the darkest, the most impossible to contend with or explain or give language to, should be considered an invitation to keep looking, to keep thinking, to keep feeling, to continue our investigations into our own minds and hearts and into the minds and hearts of other people. To consider that there may be an experience in our lifetimes or the lifetimes that led to our lifetimes that might illuminate even some small part of the most damaged and damaging parts of ourselves. This is an invitation not to solve the mystery but to allow the mystery to continue around us and to not turn away from that which seems ineffable. If the wound is a kind of speaking, we must listen. Exodus's God is an invitation to listen even when we cannot understand.

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