

In an article on the question, ‘Is psychoanalysis relevant to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict?’ in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (106:165-173), the psychoanalyst Shmuel Erlich puts forward his hypothesis that ‘the unique and widespread intensity surrounding the focus on the Gaza war, is [because] it is the most poignant expression of contemporary, rekindled antisemitism’:

Basing myself on Freud’s account in *Moses and Monotheism*... I suggest that the roots of antisemitism are in the sphere of *Geistigkeit*. Freud’s fictional recreation of events depicts Moses as introducing the belief in one invisible, abstract God to the Jewish people he led out of Egypt. Their subsequent murdering of Moses and their resulting ambivalence led to Moses’ enduring, guilt-ridden incorporation by the Jews, an unshakeable identification with him, and their stubborn adherence to his teachings. The monotheistic belief introduced abstract spirituality, or *Geistigkeit*, to mankind that heretofore knew only animism and paganism...

...The transition from paganism to abstract faith, and from the concretism of animism to the dominance of the spiritual and the intellectual, is ...perhaps the single most important developmental step mankind has taken, breaking loose of the stranglehold of the senses and their sense-presentations. The energy for this shift derives from Man’s destructive capacity as well as his capacity to love and mourn, as in Freud’s fictitious reconstruction of the murder of Moses. But the explosion set off by that murder, which created the Jewish people, has never subsided. Like a volcano, its ripples continue to rumble

...The struggle ... continues to erupt in the form of hatred of the Jews. Antisemitism is therefore forever intertwined with the story of mankind.

... Antisemitism can erupt in places and cultures that have never even seen a Jew... Where there are no Jews, they would have to be invented out of this deep struggle in our psyche, a struggle which represents much of what we cherish about our humanity, which is always at risk.

...The explanation I offered for this [focus on Gaza] is that it must have to do with antisemitism, the fact that it is the one Jewish state that is accused and attacked, also witnessed by the fact that non-Israeli Jews all over the world are threatened and persecuted, even though they have nothing to do with the situation in Gaza or the actions of Israel. All of this needs to be viewed against the background that, for many years, Israel has been the focus of an inordinate amount of projections, far outstripping its size and place. It appears that the current situation is but a link, albeit an especially prominent one, in this chain.

In my response to this article, published by the *IJPA* in April 2026 (107: 115-116), I referred, as Erlich does, to Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*. In particular I focused on the reading by the late Edward Said, a Palestinian academic, activist and literary and music critic, who also referred to this work, but drew from it rather different conclusions.

[extract from my letter] Said examined Freud’s sense of what it was to be Jewish in the lecture “Freud and the Non-European” (Said 2003). Like Erlich, he looked to *Moses and Monotheism*, which he places in the same category as Beethoven’s late works: “bristlingly difficult”, with “a willingness to let irreconcilable elements ...

remain as they are”. He quotes Freud on Jewish monotheism: “it is honour enough for the Jewish people that it kept alive such a tradition and produced men who lent it their voice, even if the stimulus had first come from the outside, from a great stranger”. The “great stranger” Freud referred to was Moses the Egyptian, but he also acknowledged the Egyptian Pharaohs who were his predecessors in establishing a monotheistic religion: Freud acknowledges that he is denying the Jewish people the man they praise as the greatest of their sons, but says he does so in the service of a truth far more important than their supposed national interests (Said 2003, 32). This positions monotheism as evolutionary, cross-cultural rather than nationalistic. But that goes entirely against the Zionist project.

There are several reasons for my deep concern over the plight of Gaza and Palestine. There is the historic part played by Britain. There is the impunity with which a right-wing government is slaughtering thousands of innocent people and reducing others to starvation and destitution. But another is because we are seeing again what happens to victims of a racist, nationalist cause. I think this helps us understand the current importance attached to the term genocide, despite the complicated legal ramifications surrounding it. Israel is eliminating the Palestinian civilisation, and not just its claim to rights and statehood, justifying this by claiming an ancient Jewish homeland, and going to desperate lengths to justify its occupation. This is of course of great concern in these days of flag-flying and the creeping legitimisation of racism dressed up as nationalism.

Said’s lecture offers a way of thinking that steps aside from that black and white narrative, with its elimination of difference as a value, and in fact its hatred of morality and intellect. I also turned with relief to Fakhry Davids’s article in the same issue, with its sensitive questioning of both his patient and himself in the fraught days that followed 7th October 2023. Both, I believe, represent what psychoanalysts need to say about the consequences of the conflict being played out before our horrified eyes, and to which our government and, equally regrettably, our psychoanalytic institutions offer only ineffectual, token words. Psychoanalysts, I believe, need to examine these consequences with care, attention and self-reflection. Maybe then we will find out what psychoanalysis has to say about the Israel–Palestinian conflict.

In the same month my letter was published, another member of our group posted an article about GCSE textbooks, published by Pearson and Hodder, which have come under intense attention from pro-Israel advocates: <https://www.campaign.org/post/pearson-caught-in-middle-east-history-textbook-scandal>,

Reading this article, I was reminded again of Edward Said, who, also in *Freud and the non-European*, testified to systemic Israeli falsification of archaeological findings:

I think I am right in surmising that Freud [in *Moses and Monotheism*] mobilized the non-European past in order to undermine any doctrinal attempt that might be made to put Jewish identity on a sound foundational basis, whether religious or secular. Not surprisingly, then, we will find that when Jewish identity has been consecrated by the establishment of Israel, it is the science of archaeology that is summoned to the task of consolidating that identity in secular time; the rabbis, as well as the scholars

specializing in 'biblical archaeology', are given sacred history as their domain. Now that a huge number of commentators on and practitioners of archaeology - from William Albright and Edmund Wilson to Yigal Yadin, Moshe Dayan, and even Ariel Sharon - have noted that archaeology is *the* privileged Israeli science *par excellence* ... archaeology became the royal road to Jewish-Israeli identity, one in which the claim is repeatedly made that in the present-day land of Israel the Bible is materially realized thanks to archaeology, history is given flesh and bones. the past is recovered and put in dynastic order.... What we discover is an extraordinary and revisionist attempt to substitute a new positive structure of Jewish history for Freud's *insistently* more complex and discontinuous late-style efforts to examine the same thing...

Said goes on to refer to the work of Nadia Abu el-Haj, who connects:

The actual practice of archaeology with a nascent national identity - an ideology with plans for the repossession of the land through renaming and resettling, much of it given archaeological justification as a schematic extraction of Jewish identity despite the existence of Arab names and traces of other civilizations... Abu el-Haj's meticulous deconstruction of archaeology is ... a history of the negation of Arab Palestine...

What Said is underlining is the use to which science and scholarship are put: proof of Jewish identity in Israel versus Palestinian challenges to archaeological 'facts' in order to open the way to the existence of other histories and a multiplicity of voices.

It is extremely troubling, but maybe should come as no surprise, that the UK is following Israel's lead – while of course Israel is following the lead of our former Empire - to make education follow an agenda set by a determination to rewrite history in furtherance of a nationalist cause – in this recent case, Zionism.

Erlich's article also attempts to put Israel's 'war crimes' (NB not 'genocide') at the door of Netanyahu's government, rather than a new chapter in a much longer effort to dispossess the Arab and Christian Palestinians of their claim to land:

Furthermore, the Jews did not come as colonialists representing another country but as a return to their ancient homeland where their presence was uninterrupted over the centuries of exile. Before the 1948 War of Independence, land was acquired peacefully and not aggressively..

Of course, the date when land was claimed anything but peacefully goes back to well before 1948, and we know that the British played a dishonourable part in this, in the build-up to the Second World War, as Annemarie Jacir's film *Palestine 1936* shows so powerfully.

We need to fight, point by point, against the propagandist rewriting of history, in which even such apparently small skirmishes as the *IJPA* correspondence can be shown to have a footing in a much wider movement.

Alison Vaspe, April 2026

